JAZZ BABY

The Shocking Story of Joan Crawford's Tormented Childhood

DAVID HOBSTON

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For my father,
Houston F. Lumpkin, Jr.

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FOREWORD

"Joan Crawford is the only Hollywood star I know," said Hedda Hopper in the forties, "who manufactured herself."

But manufacturing starts with raw material; there had to be something uncommon to begin with, something malleable underneath—something capable of being turned into "the most publicized woman in the world," one of the most famous of Hollywood's stars in the era of stars.

This is the story of the raw material, of little Billie Cassin, an eccentric child lacking ordinary confidence who, Joan Crawford claimed, always lingered inside her. "When I'm tired," she said in a 1955 interview, "Billie's child voice, Southern accent and all, rises again in my throat. When I need tears for a big emotional scene in a picture, I catch back some of her memories."

Much of Billie's story has not been told before. It is pieced together here from interviews with old-timers

in Kansas City, Missouri, and Lawton, Oklahoma—people who knew the Cassin family, who knew Billie at various ages, and from descendants who have kept their "Joan Crawford stories" alive as part of family histories. These stories have been interwoven with published material of Joan Crawford's pre-Hollywood years.

Some of the articles and news items have been ignored since the twenties and thirties. They contain material that is often at variance with accepted ideas about Joan Crawford's early life.

She was, for example, older than she claimed. Two years older, according to records at Stephens College. Three years older, according to the recollections of nuns from St. Agnes Academy. Four years older, according to Christina Crawford in her book *Mommie Dearest.* Six years older, according to several people in Lawton who played with her as a child.

A columnist, Donald Marshman, wrote in the early thirties: "The years of Miss Crawford's birth have been variously identified as 1904, 1906, 1908, and 1909, the last being her favorite. If this were true, however, her entry to Missouri's Stephens College would have been at thirteen, a dubious possibility."

Other events are thrown out of kilter as well. Was she twelve when she met Ray Sterling, reportedly the first love of her life? Was she fourteen when she left home and worked in a department store? Was she only sixteen when, after dancing in two Broadway shows, she signed her contract with MGM? A few years can make an enormous difference in interpreting events of childhood and adolescence.

The matter has been debated for decades. Birth

certificates were not required in Texas until 1908, and there is not one on file at San Antonio, her birthplace. In 1947, columnist Sheilah Graham wrote: "Joan Crawford plans to publish her birth certificate, she says, to prove once and for all that she is thirty-nine years old." There was no such publication.

As early as 1934, Hollywood columnists were challenging Crawford to prove her age. In September of that year, a Chicago *Daily News* item showed a photo of her MGM personnel card, filled out in 1926. It contained this information:

NAME: Lucille LeSueur [Her first professional name]
ADDRESS: Washington Hotel
TEL. NO.: Culver City 2141
AGE: 17
HEIGHT: 5′3″
APPEARANCE: Plain
CLASS: Ingenue
WEIGHT: 145
CARRIAGE: Good
COLORING: Light Brunette

This only proves that when MGM asked her age, Joan said seventeen. She was more than likely twenty-one.

"My aunt and Billie wore the same clothes," a lady in Kansas City reported, "and we always assumed they were the same age. My aunt was born in 1904."

"Hal [Billie's brother] and I were the same age," a man in Lawton said, "and in the same grade in school. I was born in 1904. Billie was older, a grade ahead."

Although Joan Crawford always claimed her brother was older than she—from two to six years older, depending on the story being told—every

source available in Lawton, including firsthand memories from several who were neighbors of the Cassins and playmates of Billie and Hal, agreed that Billie was the elder child.

If Hal had been born sometime in 1904, as his *New York Times* obituary indicated, it would be tempting to infer that Billie was born in 1903, making her even older than Christina Crawford believed.

But the memories of acquaintances in Lawton center around a time when Billie and Hal were in the eight-to-fourteen-years age range, both of them crossing the puberty line—when behavior as much as appearance implies age. And there is a more reliable record of Hal's age: the Kansas City public school files. A 1917 card on him lists his birthday as September 3, 1903. His sister simply could not have been older than that. (There are no records indicating that Billie ever attended a Lawton or Kansas City public school. File cards might have been taken by starstruck employees in later years.)

With no trustworthy documents available, the matter of Billie's age becomes a question of deduction and consistency. A photograph from their childhood has survived, and in it Billie looks about a year and a half younger than Hal; they might be three and five. The events of her life—her reputation for eyeing soldiers even before she left Lawton, her years spent at various private schools, her popularity as a society gatecrasher, her terms of employment in four cities before her arrival in Hollywood—all of it is consistent with the assumption that she was born March 23, 1905—making her three to five years older than she usually claimed.

In 1928, the *New York News* was undoubtedly on the right track with their statement that "Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., 19, film star of the second generation, and Joan Crawford, 24, former New York stage dancer, today issued double announcements of their engagement." Their marriage license says they were both twenty-one. Fairbanks later confirmed that he had been nineteen and had lied about his age.

Age was not the only question that needed to be resolved. Joan seldom told a story the same way twice. Particulars varied from year to year even in articles and books with her byline. For this account the sources most often relied upon were the earliest. Understandably, her memories became more romanticized with the passage of time, more supportive of her picture in the public eye.

Joan told biographer Roy Newquist, "I'm a goddamn image, not a person." And Newquist told his readers he thought Crawford "semi-schizophrenic." Newquist—who captured the most candid Crawford in his book *Conversations With Joan Crawford*—pointed out some of her contradictions, and she retorted, "What do you expect? Metro never gave me lessons in consistency."

Bob Thomas attempted to separate lies from likelihoods for his comprehensive biography, *Joan Crawford.* He did succeed in counteracting the sugercoated sketchiness of her own *Portrait of Joan,* though his account of her pre-Hollywood years essentially accepts her version of events.

In 1971, *My Way of Life* by Joan Crawford was published. While containing very little of historical substance, it is in one way the most revealing document of

all. In it she advises women readers how to attract, please, and keep a husband (Joan had several, and countless lovers), how to be at all times glamorous and gracious (she was renowned for bawdy jokes and crude language), how to hold one's temper (her smoldering vindictiveness was famous), how to raise children (she was notoriously inept at motherhood), how to maintain a positive and lofty image of oneself (her friends claimed she had a sadly low self-esteem), and, holding herself up as an ideal to be emulated, she shares her diet, favorite pastimes, secrets of makeup, and other trivialities of daily living. She condescendingly describes the view from her Manhattan window:

"I can see such big chunks of sky that I know before the weather forecasters do whether my plane will be able to take off, if it's one of the many days of the year I'm leaving on another business trip. I have a bird's view of the world here, and a bird's sense of freedom. I have the same sense of excitement about the next adventure I had when I was sixteen."

Crawford had a financial need to publish that book. Her last husband, Pepsi-Cola executive Alfred Steele, had died leaving her not with a fortune but with debts. She had sold her Brentwood, California, mansion and moved permanently to a New York apartment. By all accounts, when she wrote *My Way of Life* she was a lonely woman mainly devoted to answering, personally and at length, every item of fan mail she received. Phenomenally, she still received bags of it, although her final movie, a forgettable horror film, was behind her.

All that mail came from women who adored the Crawford image, the very women for whom she had

written *My Way of Life.* Those fans loved the svelte and graceful romantic star who thrilled them to chills in the arms of Clark Gable and others of Hollywood's most powerful leading men. The mail was for the actress who proved that shop girls can make good and love conquers all, the actress who surprised critics with fine performances in a number of films, including *Grand Hotel,* in which she held her own against Greta Garbo; *Possessed,* her personal favorite; *The Women,* wherein she risked her image by playing the tawdry "other woman"; and *Mildred Pierce,* for which she won an Oscar.

Those fans were writing to the woman who had risen from poverty with scant education and no skills to become an international star, the woman who joined the "royal family" of Hollywood with her marriage to Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and who thereafter grew in sophistication both in life and in the screen roles of her eighty-three pictures; the woman who, when her career was waning, married one of America's dynamic businessmen and dedicated herself to his career as well as her own; the woman with a name known the world over.

In all these things her letter-writing fans were right. They showed honest admiration and good sense in their choice of an idol. They just didn't know the half of it.

Recent books have dwelt on her life in Hollywood, when she swam with the angelfish and barracudas of that Klieg-lighted aquarium. These books have revealed her loyalties, deceptions, cruelties, kindnesses, ambitions, romances, and periodic upheavals in image and life style.

Jazz Baby is about her first life. It's the story of a Cinderella who found desperate ways to make do without a fairy godmother—a misfit in the rural Bible Belt of the 1910s, a misfit in the big-city Roaring Twenties, an uncouth outsider determined to wedge herself into high society but who had no idea how to go about it until she devised a silent smile, learned the "Black Bottom," and discovered boys.

JAZZ BABY

ONE

"I was a tomboy," Joan Crawford told interviewers. Others recall that she was more than that. In 1913 there were about 10,000 people in Lawton, Oklahoma, and an inordinate number of them knew the Cassin girl on sight. At the age of eight, Billie was a fixture of the town. She was the daughter of the manager of two of the town's best theaters. She was the girl who tossed off her skirt and climbed the water tower on a dare, the loner who behaved as if she were the most popular girl in town, the girl who seemed to thrive on stares and silence and rejection.

"I walked to school with Billie yesterday," a boy or girl would brag and watch mouths fall open.

She was known as a fighter. The slightest slur or insult on the school playground, and she would attack. No one got the better of battling Billie. Her name was

Lucille, but her brother Hal and other boys at school called her Billie—Billie the tomboy.

"I was forbidden to play with Lucille," recalls Christina Swanson, still a resident of Lawton. "So was my friend Garvine Gooch, whose father was a doctor and owned a house on the block. But I remember my mother told me I was to go to this birthday party somebody was giving for Lucille. My friend Ruth went, too. Leslie Powell was there—his father was later elected mayor. I don't remember much about the party. Just that somebody gave Lucille a toothbrush, and I thought that was very funny."

Christina, Garvine, Ruth, and Leslie were neighbors of the Cassins in the 800 block of D Avenue in Lawton. Christina and others have difficulty recalling, from so long ago, just why mothers attempted to keep their daughters from associating with Billie. The family was prominent, and Billie's brother was popular and welcome anywhere. But there are clues.

Joan wrote several times about her "wonderful gypsy dress." She neglected to mention that she wore it everywhere, or that she had done all the unskilled sewing herself.

Some Lawtonians still remember that dress (it seems likely there were several dresses). They remember standing or swinging on their white-frame porches in the summer heat and watching with disdainful curiosity as the Cassin girl passed by on another of her lonely walks downtown.

She shuffled pensively along in the unpaved gutter, her eyes not acknowledging the other eyes watching her, the rickrack of "that dress" trailing off her hem in the back. The dress was butterfly-bright in a

world decorated in the colors of sand and soot; it was red and turquoise, Joan wrote, made from scraps of theatrical costumes. A yellow ostrich plume was stuck in a black headband. She walked like a boy. She seemed both oblivious to her "audience" and self-conscious because of it. She was chubby, childish, but unsettlingly wise—like a midget pretending to be a child.

If Billie happened to be on her way to town—a short walk of several blocks—she was doubtless going to visit her Daddy at work, work that seemed entirely like play to Billie. In summer she found him at Cassin's Air Dome Theater, a 500-seat open-air playhouse across from the Court House square.

Reminiscing, Don Harvey—at one time the assistant property master for the Air Dome—said, "Lucille was really just an ordinary girl, I always thought. She was quiet, kept to herself. I'd usually see her out front by the candy concession. She loved her candy. As a rule she wasn't allowed backstage during performances; it was too hectic back there."

But in the afternoons before showtime, Billie could watch rehearsals and the "changeovers" between shows. That summer a touring company of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* traveled around the Midwest. Billie must have been there waiting when personnel and scenery arrived by train from Wichita Falls, Texas. The play starred a husband-and-wife team—The Fairchilds, according to the memory of one Lawtonian.

"Actors often traveled as husband and wife," Don Harvey explained. "It saved on touring costs, for one thing; one hotel room instead of two, one carriage from the station instead of two. It also lent respectability to the ladies of the companies."

Billie would have watched the arrival of *Jekyll and Hyde* from beneath the giant oaks on the Court House lawn. The long drays—their horse teams as patient as stuffed animals—were unloaded outside the wrought-iron "New Orleans" facade of the theater. Wooden trunks strapped with iron and tarp-wrapped wall sections of settings were maneuvered through the double doors. Motor cars brought the cast and backstage crew.

Rufus Propes, owner of City Cab Company, would have personally escorted the stars, at no cost; and he'd have seen to it that Mayor Boyle was there to greet Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild as they stepped down from his loud black machine that looked like a baby carriage with its bonnet down.

Joan wrote that her Daddy Cassin "was the center of my child's world." While she drank in the theatrical excitement around him, she could not have been aware that the mothers of Lawton's young ladies were conspiring against her. Today, some of those then-young ladies remember hearing their parents use phrases such as these, often spoken over the new hand-crank telephones that sent opinions along wires that were draped around town like yarn on a loom:

"Lucille is so unpredictable."

"Her mother is too strict and her father too lenient."

"She was absent from school as often as she attended last year."

"She'd better marry at a very early age."

"I've never known Henry to take his wife or children to church; he's Catholic. God knows what *they* are."

The phrases would have hurt Billie, but already at

the age of eight she had made herself incommunicado and was not likely to hear them. And the theater kept her immune. Nothing in the world could hurt her while, for example, she watched Mrs. Fairchild practice her intermission recital, singing the soaring and melancholy "After the Ball"—the most popular song in the country that summer.

. . . after the dancers' leaving, after the stars are gone. Many a heart is aching, if you could read them all; many the hopes that have vanished, after the ball. . . .

Prop-master Don Harvey recalled that "economy companies" such as the *Jekyll and Hyde* tour required their principal players to double as vaudevillians in front of the "in-one" backdrop while scenery was being changed behind it. "The performers were better in those days, more accomplished, more versatile," Harvey said. The Fairchilds did not mind the double duty: it made them superstars, however fleetingly, to art-starved small-towners.

The world of pre-teen Billie is long gone. It was both gentler and more violent, more kindly and more bigoted, more trusting and more suspicious than today's world.

"Up to the time of statehood in 1907," said Harvey, "Lawton was a wide-open western town where adventurers came to claim land and make their fortunes. The Federal government ran the town under what amounted to martial law. But it didn't work too well, and most men carried guns. Many still did up into the twenties."

The early years of the new century in middle America were dominated culturally and philosophically by the phenomenon called Chautauqua. Only news

traveled quickly, by telegraph; ideas and entertainment traveled by book or, more popularly, by Chautauqua.

The players and lecturers who presented themselves under mammoth traveling Chautauqua tents were the essence of respectability, the G-rated custodians of motherhood, home, and heaven. Among the troupers were such notables as Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, evangelist Billy Sunday, ventriloquist Edgar Bergen, the Sousa band, Metropolitan soprano Madame Schumann-Heink, full companies of *The Mikado* with symphony orchestra, assorted Swiss bell-ringers, Russian dancers, Hawaiian warriors, Indian princesses, magicians, humorists, gospel choirs, and the like. These and other attractions as great played towns the size of Lawton and much smaller. Everybody in town, and from surrounding farms, came to the week-long inspirational Chautauqua. In Lawton, the men left their guns at home, as they did when they went to church.

While there were a couple of saloons and a ragtime sportin' house down by the tracks, which had entertainments of questionable taste, Henry Cassin's theaters bowed utterly to the popular demand for respectable fare. The Cassins were not, as biographers have suggested, shunned because they rubbed elbows with show-biz low life. If anything, they were held a bit in awe. To be sure, Cassin's attractions were not of the highest caliber; but neither were they "fifth rate," "tawdry," or "sleazy." They were as pure (to the public eye, at least) as the sun-scorched dust that never quite settled out of the prairie air over Lawton.

Before he died recently, Leslie Powell, a New York artist who grew up at 806 D Avenue, next door to the

Cassins, recalled that at the Air Dome his family "thrilled to plays like *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and musicals by small touring companies."

Billie never forgot Leslie Powell, either. Illustrating her frequent punishments at the hands of her mother, Anna, Joan wrote that once "the boy next door, Leslie Powell" tossed a ball to Hal in the Cassin yard. When Hal ran for it, he trampled a nasturtium bed. Billie, as often happened, got the blame. "I did not do it!" she muttered through clenched teeth. "Why doesn't Hal tell the truth?"

Joan wrote: "Mother immediately assumed I'd been running or trying to 'walk the tightrope' on the fence. That day my legs were switched again, and I was put in the corner."

Nothing ignited Anna Cassin's anger more than what she called Billie's "tomboy antics." "Unwarranted punishment only made me rebellious," Joan wrote.

Powell remembered an occasion (impossible to date, except that it was summer) when there was a flash flood that filled the Cassin storm cellar half full. "We swam in the muddy pool," he recalled.

The cellar was out back by the barn. It was nothing more, really, than a large square well covered by boards and a mound of earth with a trapdoor leading to a ladder. The walls were of rock and the floor was dirt. "It was a nasty place, full of spiders and snakes, dark, the kind of place only kids can enjoy," another neighbor said.

Joan told an interviewer about an incident involving the cellar, when it was used appropriately. The twilight sky was brown and boiling. The air was muggy, and there were twigs, straw, and dirt in the wind. A

telephone operator called to warn that a "cyclone" had hit a farm nearby. Anna Cassin's nerves were on edge; her obvious fear frightened Billie more than the weather.

"I don't want to go to the cellar!" Billie proclaimed, holding back.

Henry Cassin arrived breathless, bringing a family that had no storm cellar. The thought of such a crowd in that hot, dank, crawling pit alarmed Billie all the more. The wind was rising, and there was thunder.

Cassin lifted his daughter and carried her through the spitting rain. "Not for long," he said soothingly, "I promise."

Daddy was frightened, too. The contagion of alarm finally quieted Billie, and she clung to her father's neck.

The storm abated; they escaped the tornado. But it was a moment in childhood the little girl was never to forget.

For Billie, like most children, summer was reality—when you could measure that you were growing. School years were a blur. Not even her dance classes, which continued year-round, helped her to recall fall, winter, or spring.

It is probable that Billie was given a class in ballroom and interpretive dance once a week at a music studio over the Powell drug store. After such a lesson, Billie may have met playmates or her father at the drugstore owned by Leslie's father, for its ice-cream fountain was always clamorous with children. What confections Powell's failed to supply were obtained half a block away at Pale's Bakery where Ernest and Belle

Cease delighted in surprising the kids with new and ever-sweeter puffs, puddings, and cookies.

Four city blocks contained almost everything that meant "downtown" to Billie. Within sight of the horse-and-auto scented intersection of Fourth and D were Daddy's office, and across from it, the Ramsey Opera House—built on the roofs of two two-story brick buildings, one of which housed Daddy's bank, the Merchants and Planters Bank of Lawton. Powell's Drugs was on the near corner. In another direction was Pale's Bakery and the high school (where elementary students also studied while a new building was being erected). Turn left and you looked toward the Comanche Light and Power building. Turn again, there in the middle of the intersection, and you faced the Court House and across from its park, Cassin's Air Dome.

It was a compact and intelligible universe for a growing girl who liked to roam the streets alone.

TWO

The summer of 1916 was Billie's most eventful to date. She was eleven, shy, plump as usual, precocious in her observations. She began, that summer, to calculate her advantages. She learned that one must plan ahead in order to achieve, and that plans notwithstanding, the unforseen can bring about the end of the world. In her case, the unforseen consisted of a broken bottle and a bag of gold.

Summer began when Cassin presented "The Pavlova of America"—with her corps of five girls and a female trio of piano, violin, and harp—at the Opera House. After the real Pavlova's New York appearance in 1910, her artistry was debated far and wide though few had actually seen her dance. A number of acts purported to exhibit "Pavlova's style of dance" and relied on some of her repertoire. Such acts played vaudeville

houses and Chautauquas; they braved pioneer villages even more raw than Lawton.

Cassin booked his Pavlova act only for a matinee and two evening shows. Billie—wide-eyed and with a persistent lump in her throat—tagged after the ballerina like a purring kitten all three days and made herself useful to the extent it was permitted.

Billie was not a nuisance. Kansas City writer John Moffitt wrote in 1932: "The troupers who made Henry Cassin's theater in their rounds came to like the 'kid' who was so generous with the actor's favorite coin, adulation. They sent her little gifts and postcards."

The ballerina had shrewdly programmed an anticlimax into her show: following a frenzied "Gypsy Fantasy" with her girls, she concluded with the quiet, spellbinding, two-minute long "Dying Swan" by herself on a dim, empty stage. It always brought the house down.

Somehow, though, it was the gypsy dance that Billie remembered—the "dancers flying about, light dazzling in their spangled skirts," as Joan wrote years later. She spoke in interviews several times about visiting backstage during that particular show.

She told the ballerina, "I want to be a dancer." And the charmed artist gave Billie her first makeup lesson. She opened a pot of lip rouge and asked Billie to "bend down . . . tip your head back a little," while she applied the magic.

Years later, in 1930, Joan told an interviewer that when she looked at her "fascinating fairyland face in that mirror" she was wearing "crimson rouge and pur-

ple eye shadow" and that it was "altogether wonderful."

Before the ballerina left for her next engagement at some small town down the railroad tracks, she gave Billie a pair of toe shoes. They were used ones, and too large, but they, like the makeup, possessed mystical powers. "You must be taught how to use them properly," the great lady cautioned.

Lawtonians remember that sometimes young men from the Army training center at Fort Sill would date the ladies of the choruses of the Cassin theaters. Townsfolk disapproved, "but there wasn't any real problem," said John March, who remembers those days.

Billie undoubtedly saw them at the stage door—the handsome uniformed soldiers and the beautiful gypsy dancers—laughing, kissing in the moonlight. It surely seemed amazing to Billie that her mother deemed such happy behavior "wicked" and "scandalous."

Perhaps emboldened by her unusual acceptance at the birthday party Christina Swanson remembers, Billie began to think seriously about staging her own theatrical show for an audience of her playmates and neighbors. Billie knew her mother would disapprove, but she'd have her Daddy on her side. It also occurred to her that if she approached him just right, she might persuade her brother Hal to help.

From all Lawton accounts, Hal was an ordinary enough youngster. At twelve he was a suntanned outdoors-type like his sister, but there the family resemblance ended. Hal was taller, skinnier, more

fine-boned than Billie; his hair was blond, hers was brunette; he was obedient, she was rebellious; his happy-go-lucky charm overshadowed her introverted nature and private smiles. Nothing but their common address indicated they were from the same family.

Lawtonian John March remembers games he and Hal played in the newly excavated sewer trenches that crisscrossed the alleys; and he remembers playing with Hal in the Cassin barn where Hal had rigged trapezes from rafters over scenery stalls. Hal was not taken in by the glamour of theater life; instead he wanted to be a circus aerialist. At least that summer he did.

Billie thought a display of Hal's skill on the swinging bars could be an attraction in the variety show—if she could keep him from trying to be boss. Besides, she'd need the cooperation of his friends.

The Cassin barn was one of many on D Avenue. Some of the others were still used for horses, harnesses, and rigs. Henry Cassin sometimes spoke about getting a Ford to park in the barn, but so far his family had managed well enough without one. Besides, he had other uses for the barn. Although he produced few theatricals himself, he occasionally had scenery or platforms built; and over the years, many a touring troup had left trunks, drapes, or items of furniture. Two or three had abandoned whole settings when Cassin's was the last date at the end of their tour. Cassin had to store the props somewhere.

There was a *Robin Hood* backdrop hung from a batten under the high peak over what used to be a hayloft. Billie thought it would be perfect for her ballet, and she could perform a gypsy dance in front of flats that had been walls for a rustic cabin. She asked Leslie

Powell to manage settings and lights, and turned the problem of music over to Hal—while she readied herself to become a star.

Henry thought the enterprise delightful and productive for his children. He provided materials, a little manpower, and a suggestion that the boys make footlights out of candles and tin cans. With Henry and Hal ganged up against her, Anna acquiesced but adamantly refused to permit them to move "her piano" (only Billie and her father played it) to the barn. Anna found one consolation: at least it wasn't Billie doing the gymnastics.

Henry had time to help; business was not booming of late, and he knew it wasn't going to pick up in the near future. The ventilation system at the Opera House was inadequate for the hottest weeks, and it would be closed for August. The Air Dome bookings this year were smaller, more pinch-penny tours—representing a lesser initial investment but a greater risk if sales slumped. And both his theaters would be closed during Chautauqua, when the big tent monopolized entertainment. It would not have been prudent for Cassin to compete with the Mayor's special Chautauqua committee, which totally underwrote the nonprofit extravaganza.

Cassin is remembered as a cheerful wheeler-dealer, a gambler. Even his abstracts business—which ran title searches for buyers and sellers of property—was a wager against Lawton's future expansions; seldom did it bring in more in a month than the rent on the office. Billie and her Daddy had adventurousness in common.

Both of his theaters were dark that midweek June

night when Henry Cassin hurried home from his office to see Billie's performance.

Two boys rattled open the sliding barn doors as one might part a stage curtain. Just inside, framed in the proscenium of the door opening, lighted by lavender twilight and flickering candles, Billie stood in a ballerina's pose, her arms setting her tilted head in parentheses, her heels together. She had made her more-or-less white costume from scraps of lace and silk, and completed her ensemble with white cotton stockings.

The audience—eight or ten children and eight or ten adults, including Billie's admirers from the theater staffs—applauded. They sat on picnic benches and blankets on the lawn.

"I'll do a dance from the beautiful ballet *Giselle,*" Billie announced without breaking her pose or her radiant smile. The "orchestra"—one boy played harmonica and three whistled—struck up the closest thing they knew to *Giselle,* "The Sidewalks of New York," and Billie waltzed.

"She was just a little girl dancing," a neighbor remembered. "I don't recall anything said about talent—one way or the other."

Her indistinct shadow waltzed against the sunny Sherwood Forest backdrop, which billowed a little in the breeze she created. The surprise in her eyes, the warmth of her smile, the coy exhibitionism of her movements were artlessly sensual.

The orchestra whistled a march for Hal's act, in which another boy joined him in swinging from pipes on ropes that were tied to the rafters. For their finish, the boys swung toward each other hanging by their

knees until Hal could grasp his friend's wrists and pull him off the bar, up, and to the ground.

Billie wore her red-and-turquoise dress for the finale. She did a gypsy dance to the lively "Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie," in front of rustic wall pieces that Leslie had placed in front of the *Robin Hood* backdrop. She was childishly charming. Nothing about her appearance quite fit or matched. She wore the ballerina's much-too-large toe shoes stuffed with cotton, and for her finish she skipped up and posed on unsteady point, grinning proudly even though every toenail and joint down there was rebelling.

The show lasted only about ten minutes. To Billie, it seemed to end before it had really begun. As she took her bow, one of the high school boys who sometimes worked at the Air Dome whistled rudely, gloriously; and Billie beamed in his direction. Daddy had brought one of those "wicked" soldiers from Fort Sill, and he was smiling and clapping politely. Mother approved, too, but the enthusiasm was more than likely for Hal. She had made the spangled circus tights he and his friend wore.

That night Billie wrapped the toe shoes lovingly in tissue and retired them temporarily to the bottom of her closet. She lay awake daydreaming a kaleidoscope of images and feelings, the upshot of which was that all the ballerinas she had watched dancing, and all the performers those dancers had ever told her about—all of them were Billie.

The show was given again several days later, by popular demand, to a slightly larger audience (many of them repeaters), though a number of the neighborhood girls still did not deign to come.

"Girls are not very good audiences for another girl," wrote John Moffitt. "They made fun of Billie's mannerisms, and their mothers told them the grand theatrical gestures she had copied from the troupers were 'common.' But the boys knew it was all make believe."

It didn't make any difference to Billie. She started to plan her next extravaganza—one that would be bigger and better.

Cassin brought a minstrel show to town that did not sit well with the guardians of conscience in Lawton. (He had been assured the show was a surefire draw by booking agents who did not grasp the puritanism of small-town Oklahoma.) A comic told jokes that were a shade off-color; and the dancing girls seemed a trifle too French. The box office was good, but shortly after the show closed rumors flickered through town that Henry had had an affair with someone in the cast. Or had it been that Pavlova woman? Somebody, anyway. Another old rumor—that one or both of Anna Cassin's children was illegitimate—resurfaced. (That notion persists in Lawton to this day.) Though there were no storm clouds overhead, something was casting shadows on the Cassins all of a sudden.

Henry good-naturedly dismissed the probing questions put to him; but it was clearly time for him to book a Chautauqua lecturer on "Family Life Versus Free Love" or "Saul of Tarsus" or "The Evils of Alcohol" or some other reassuring subject.

Chautauqua carried with it a number of side effects; one was a collection of young people's movements that included Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls. America's attitude toward the "Red Man" had recently

shifted radically, thanks to "noble savage" ideas spread by poets, philosophers, and cultural anthropologists; consequently Indian lore underlay all the youth movements (which were spread as a method of keeping noisy youngsters out of the tent when serious lecturers were on stage).

That summer, anticipating the arrival of the brightly painted Chautauqua railroad cars, scores of youngsters donned breachcloths and buckskins, stuck feathers in headbands, and painted their faces with water colors and food dyes. Hal and Leslie were among them. D Avenue was on the war path.

Billie was being a good girl for once. She had helped her mother with housework and was dutifully practicing at the old piano in the living room when she heard the Comanche cries of young savages.

Anna Cassin heard them, too. She paused by the hall door and watched her daughter.

Billie stopped playing the scale but kept her hands on the keyboard.

"No, you may not go out," her mother said, anticipating Billie's request.

Joan, perhaps remembering the incident, once said, "How foolish it is for mothers to say to their children, 'No! You cannot do it!' without an adequate explanation. If they had told me *why*—but they didn't. So I used to run away and play with the boys anyway."

When Billie heard her mother rattling dishes in the kitchen again, she slammed down the keyboard cover and sprinted through the screened porch door. It slammed, too.

The last of a tribe of braves whooped by; one of them waved to Billie.

She leaped off the porch over a tall hydrangea.

The fleet-footed boys were out of sight around the corner by the time Billie landed. She did not realize at first what had happened. Ouch! Had she stepped on a rock? Then all the signals reached her brain. She did not cry out; the pain was so great she fainted.

A broken milk bottle had been kicked out of the way beneath the bushy flowering plant. A chunk of it had been so razor sharp that it had cut entirely through her well-worn shoe and gouged deeply into the arch of her foot. Blood flooded from the deep wound.

The July sun was hot, and the air was steamy from a recent rain. Almost everyone with good sense was inside in the shade.

One youngster, however, saw it happen. Across the street, the Blanding boy was just leaving his house with a package for the post office. He looked up when he heard Billie's door slam shut, and he smiled at her *grand jeté*. Then he saw her crumble to the ground. When she had been still a moment, he realized something might be wrong.

Billie next remembered hearing her mother blubbering hysterically and Don Blanding saying into the telephone loudly, "Doc? There's been an accident at the Cassins." In shock, she later had no memory of her ride to the hospital. She did remember what she heard through the lifting ether, after her wound had been sewn shut:

"She loves her dancing," Henry Cassin mumbled to the doctor.

The doctor whispered, "That foot will always be

weak. Muscles and tendons have been severed completely. She may walk with something of a limp."

Don Blanding, Leslie Powell, Hal, and Mother were there. Anna said sadly, "Maybe this will make a lady of her."

Henry persisted. "If she exercises the foot. . . ?"

"No exercise. In fact I want her off her foot entirely for a month. If she tries to dance, the laceration may never heal."

Billie opened her eyes and saw Don Blanding smiling at her.

Thirty or so years later, Joan Crawford met Don Blanding again. She immediately remembered him as the "knight in shining armor" who saved her life that day.

Don Blanding became a professional writer. He wrote a poem in which he called little Billie a joyous creature, free from ordinary human restraints, "all legs and curls and great big eyes and restless dancing feet; as vivid as a hummingbird, as bright and swift and gay."

THREE

Billie stayed in bed obediently for the first few days. The throbbing pain was intolerable, and her only defense was sleep. Anna held Billie's hand, spooned broth into her daughter's mouth, and shed tears of her own after her baby had drifted off. Whenever she spoke or wrote about her accident, Joan remarked that this was her first inkling that her mother loved her.

Billie awoke clear-headed and hungry a few days later. She was sweating. A scent of honeysuckle blew in with a breeze that ballooned the chintz curtains printed with daisies. Sounds came in: dogs, birds, motor cars, children yelling. It sounded like afternoon.

All those things the doctor said were plain silly! Anybody with a foot can walk on it. She swung her good foot to the floor and sat up. She lowered her bandaged right till the toes brushed the Navaho rug by her bed. She felt the rough weave.

The throbbing started again. No! She would not be an invalid! Mindless of how weak she was, Billie pushed herself up onto her left leg. She teetered, and her weight shifted to the right.

Billie screamed—as much from the sight of blood that ran like red syrup from beneath the bandage as from the pain. She was petrified, afraid to move.

The porch door slammed and Anna rushed into the room. "You ought to get the switching of your life, young lady!" she said angrily. Then she saw the blood. "Oh, dear God; Hal run get the doctor."

Hal was standing at the window. "Yes, ma'am."

The second of three operations was performed on her foot that day.

For a long while, Anna guarded her daughter, smiled at her more than she had in the past years, and told Billie stories about the genteel Southern lady Grandmother Johnson was. Henry brought presents and ice cream—and an occasional trouper to cheer his ailing daughter with tales of life on the "wicked" stage. Hal stayed away as if the house were quarantined.

Hal was registered for the school term that would start in September; Billie was not. She was not a good student, and her absenteeism the previous year had placed her advancement to the next grade in jeopardy; her parents and teachers decided to wait until she was well enough to attend classes before making a final decision.

"It may have been," said a Lawton teacher, "that Billie was bored by school, rather than backward. For some unusual children, the curriculum is almost in a foreign language; their early-formed values are that di-

vergent from the norm. Perhaps 'conventional' would be a better term than 'norm.'"

From what has been written and said, it seems sure that never before and never after were Billie and her mother as friendly as during that period of convalescence. The diminutive Anna Belle Johnson Cassin—barely five feet tall, weighing no more than a hundred pounds—carried her big daughter to the bathroom, the breakfast table, the living-room couch, and once or twice to the porch swing. Billie and her mother laughed as they huffed and puffed trying to keep her foot off the floor. Joan wrote about her mother's "bell-like laughter," which she had not noticed until the accident, and which steadily died away thereafter until, by the time the family left Lawton, Anna seemed to have forgotten how to laugh.

Her infirmity seemed to last forever. "I was inactive for weeks," Joan told two interviewers; "for several months," she told another; "for a year and a half," she said on a different occasion.

Billie hopped to the closet one day to take out the toe shoes she had stored there. She was crawling, feeling among shoes and boxes, when Hal pushed the door shut and locked it.

"Let me out!" Billie yelled.

"Can't," he said, laughing. "Got to go to school."

No one else was there that morning, and Billie was locked in the dark closet, fuming, screaming now and again for help, for five hours. ("Hal was chronically mean," Joan told a biographer. To another, she said, "I was Pavlova, and Hal was Jesse James.")

Billie was seen hopping to town one day. It was

only six blocks to the Court House, but in Billie's condition it might have been six miles. One of the boys she played with helped her for a block or two by acting as her crutch.

She hopped up the steps to her Daddy's office. She found him dozing, slumped over his desk, a whiskey bottle by his hand. Billie was surprised; he seldom drank.

"I hopped all the way," she said proudly.

Much as he loved his children, Henry found it difficult to show affection for them. On this occasion he merely patted Billie's hand and said,"Run along, now." Joan later wrote that she sensed something was seriously wrong.

Once there was a soldier sitting on a bench in front of the Court House. It might have been on that very day. He smiled as bandaged Billie hopped by. She smiled back. He asked her, "What happened to you?" And she told him all about the milk bottle and the stitches and the blood.

"Show me where to get 'em, and I'll buy you a soda," he suggested.

Billie's eyes widened. Mother would disapprove, but there was something terribly exciting about this—perhaps because it was forbidden. The soldier was nice; and what could be the harm in a soda? Besides, Billie wanted to see the looks on the faces of people she knew at Powell's. It would be worth that even if somebody tattled to her mother. Everyone would be jealous!

"Okay," she said, "I'll show you."

To Billie, it all worked out as she knew it would. Everyone at Powell's did stare at them. Everyone whispered. Billie saw two gossips leaving together and

imagined that the story would spread. Her heart beat fast as the friendly soldier talked to her quietly about his little sister far away in his hometown.

Billie hopscotched happily back to D Avenue that day. She walked and danced on her foot without realizing it, and her bandage was a shredded bloody rag when she reached her porch. She called the doctor herself this time.

The doctor told her harshly that her carelessness was going to destroy her foot and she'd be "a miserable cripple" all of her life. Billie cried and cried because of the pain and the fact that the doctor obviously did not like her. She wished her soldier were here; he'd be nice to her. Imagine—a soldier bought her a soda!

In October, Anna made arrangements for a teacher to tutor Billie until it was clear what grade she belonged in and how best she could prepare to enter school after Christmas. Billie did not like the idea, but a tutor would probably be better than having to go to school for a while; and she was bored: you can't climb a tree with one good leg; you can't run or hike or dance.

Cool weather had come when Billie hopped into the backyard by herself one school day. Anna was visiting a neighbor and the tutor had gone. Someone had left the cellar door open. Hal probably. And Billie was sure to get the blame—even with her bum foot.

She looked down into the square hole. Enough sunlight streamed in to glint from something on the dirt floor. A kerosene lamp. There were matches beside it. Hal's forgetfulness again, probably.

Billie kept off her right foot as she slowly climbed down the ladder.

She lit the kerosene lamp. She remembered the horrifying night the cyclone came and they had all crowded in against the rock walls. There were a few crates there, and a half-buried cistern meant to supply fresh water but which had seldom, if ever, been used. Now the lid was rusty. A few warped shelves were wedged into the walls, shelves that held rows of Mother's preserves.

What happened next was later related by Joan in a number of different versions. She found the peculiar canvas bag under the house, according to one interview in the thirties; in a basement under the house, according to another; in the barn, she said in 1955; and in a "mysterious aperture," according to her autobiography. Whatever the general location, she found it "behind a jar of cherries," "under a pile of old costumes," "in a crate," or "buried in the ground." There was no crawl space and no basement under the house on D Avenue; that leaves the barn or the storm cellar.

The earliest account of the incident was written by Joan for *Photoplay* in 1928:

"I was shut in the house for weeks. I would hobble around with my dolls, poke my nose into this, into that. One afternoon I found a funny bag in the cellar under the cover of one of those old-fashioned empty cisterns. I pulled it out and worked for what was probably an hour to get it open. When I did, a great heap of bright, shiny, gold flat things rolled onto the cold dirt floor."

It was money, gold coins, in one of those heavy lockable canvas bags used by banks for transporting quantities of change.

Billie poured the treasure out and arranged and counted it.

"Billie?" her mother's voice echoed into the cellar.

Billie did not answer. She knew, however, that the open cellar door would probably give her away.

Anna appeared in the sunlight above her with a switch. "I've warned you time and again about taking care of that foot!"

"Mama, we're rich!" Billie said exuberantly.

Anna leaned forward for a better look at what was down there in the faint kerosene light. She dropped the switch, hefted her long heavy skirt over the sill, and climbed down. It took her eyes, and her mind, a moment to focus in the gloom.

"They were in the cistern," Billie said, puzzled by her mother's lack of excitement.

Anna slumped back on her heels. Tears came to her eyes. "You must never, never tell anyone about this," she said to her daughter.

"But maybe we can keep them. Maybe they were left here years and years ago by train robbers or something."

Anna said forcefully through her tears, "I mean it, Lucille. Don't even tell Hal or your father. *I'll* tell your father."

Anna told Henry that night. The two closed themselves in their bedroom and argued through the night. They argued until Anna was screaming hysterically and Henry was slamming his hand against the wall.

(Joan once said she was leery of marriage because she was afraid of quarreling, "afraid for my children to hear angry voices in the dark." That was before she adopted her children.)

"You've got to give the money back!" was the gist of the shrieks Billie heard.

"If I do, we'll be ruined!" was the gist of Henry's hollered replies.

Billie scarcely breathed and did not sleep. Somehow she was the agent of the furor; the gold she found was the cause of it.

Something permanent occurred between Anna and Henry that night. Thereafter the two spoke to one another only in curt phrases. It was as if the gold had carried a curse with it.

Billie's father asked her one day: "Have you ever mentioned finding the gold?"

"No," she answered truthfully.The subject frightened her too much. "Where is it?"

Henry answered obliquely, "Somebody might think I stole it."

"But you didn't!"

"If you tell anyone," Henry said with quiet emphasis, "I will have to go to prison. It's a very complicated matter, Billie."

A week or so later, a straightlaced man and woman came to see her father about buying the Cassin house. They poked around, even in Billie's room, and said the place was too small.

Anna told Mrs. Blanding that she and Henry were thinking of building a home in the new Mountain View subdivision north of town. Hal pouted about having to move away from his friends, and Henry said to him, "Don't worry, son. I don't think we'll really have to move."

There were long-distance calls at night from Oklahoma City, Dallas, and Kansas City. The children were hustled away from the phone when the calls came.

The sheriff and a deputy called one day. Anna fed

them coffee and biscuits—it was a chilly November day—while they waited for Henry to arrive.

When he did, the sheriff asked, "What do you know about a bail deposit that ought to be at the Sterling Court House, Henry?"

Henry shook his head jovially and dunked a biscuit. "I don't handle things like that. Somebody say I ought to?"

The sheriff left satisfied, apparently. Billie guessed it had something to do with the gold.

Around Christmastime, Billie and Hal were bundled up and delivered to the train station. They were to spend the holidays in Arizona with Anna's parents, the Johnsons, who owned a farm near Phoenix.

Billie could walk, though her foot still bothered her a little most of the time. Suspecting something dire was about to happen, she had sneaked her treasured ballet shoes into her suitcase.

At the station, Henry pretended that his kids were off on a great trek and would return happy and tanned from the land of winter sunshine. But Anna was a mess. She blubbered as if she were giving her babies away.

"Take care of each other," Cassin said to Billie and Hal. To Billie he added, "Everything's going to be fine."

She nodded. She believed him. They had a special understanding.

Billie leaned out daringly from the vestibule between cars and waved to her Daddy—who waved back until he and Anna were hidden by trees and a bend in the tracks.

"He's the most wonderful man in the world," Billie

said to her brother. "Did you know the other kids envy us because our daddy owns a theater?"

"Aw, you don't know," Hal said.

"Don't know what?" (Joan wrote in 1945: "I could see Hal's eyes, and they looked as they did when he dared me to do something he wasn't sure I could take.")

The vaultlike door to the sleeping car rumbled open. A porter said, "You children best get inside. It's gonna be dark soon, and we 'bout got your beds ready."

The supper Anna had packed for Billie and Hal was fried chicken, fruit, and cookies. In their nightshirts, they sat in Billie's lower berth and ate it.

Hal said suddenly, "Don't talk so much about Daddy Cassin, Billie. He isn't your real daddy."

Billie immediately started to cry although she had never suspected such a thing and only had Hal's word for it. "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Well, it's true," he said slowly.

Billie peered at him and saw no sign of amusement on Hal's face; instead, he seemed frightened at having betrayed a secret. He said, "Our real daddy lives in San Antonio. His name is LeSueur. That's your real name, too."

Joan wrote in an article: "Hal has told me since that he peeked at me several times that night, and that I was lying there with the lights on, my eyes wide open. When Hal told me, I felt not only the sense of something lost but also that I had been fooled, that they all had a secret which I had not shared."

Hal had pressured the truth out of his mother when he discovered a photograph, a picture he had

sneaked into his luggage as Billie had sneaked the ballet shoes into hers. He showed her the picture. Mother was standing with a man with "great haunted eyes," a man Hal might have dimly remembered.

The man, Thomas LeSueur, was not much taller than Anna, but his French-Canadian features were like Billie's. He had her big bones, broad shoulders, and bold facial features.

"To tell you the truth," Joan Crawford once told Roy Newquist, "I think [Hal] was my half-brother. Mother married so many times, and shacked up with so many men in between, I doubt we were one hundred percent brother and sister. People would look at us, even after he came out to Hollywood, and wonder how the hell we could even be related."

FOUR

When Billie and Hal returned, they found their house in disarray; luggage and boxes were stacked by the door and some of the furniture was missing.

"Where are we going?" Billie asked Daddy Cassin with a smile. Whoever he was, she loved him. She had made up her mind, Joan told a reporter, never to mention what Hal had told her: she dared not risk confirming that it was true.

"Kansas City."

Both children, perhaps guided by a child's intuition, let it go at that. Neither asked why.

Joan Crawford always maintained that Daddy Cassin was innocent of any crime. She said it was Cassin's "partner in an insurance business" who was the real thief, and that Cassin caught him and held the money until a way to return it could be found. They left Lawton, Joan declared, because though completely cleared

of complicity by the court, Cassin's reputation was ruined.

Many Lawtonians, then and now, believed he was guilty. The son of a well-known trial lawyer in Lawton said, "In those days the bail bond system was not as it is now. Usually a bank, but often an individual, would hold the money to serve as a bond does today. In Cassin's case, a woman in Sterling, a small town about thirty miles northeast of here, was charged with a crime, and she was in jail. She claimed she gave the money in gold coins to Henry Cassin for her bond. He claimed she didn't."

At Anna's hysterical insistence, Henry returned the money. There is no record of a trial. It is not unreasonable to suspect that Henry Cassin considered keeping the money in the belief that his word would be accepted over that of a lady crook with whom he had no visible connection. In mentioning an insurance office, Joan Crawford must have meant Henry J. Cassin Abstracts at 321 D Avenue—which was never registered as a partnership. No Lawtonians recalled any partner or even an employee of the little operation; nor is one listed under Cassin in Lawton city directories of that time.

Though there was mercifully little in local papers concerning the allegations against Cassin, word rippled out over Lawton's phone lines. Billie and Hal returned home from Phoenix to find themselves isolated by neighbors and friends—except for a loyal few, like the man who helped Henry liquidate his assets and the fellows at City Cab who promised to deliver the family and their portable possessions to the station in time for

the evening Rock Island express to Tulsa, Witchita, and Kansas City.

Henry sold his house at a loss but got enough for what he hoped would be an adequate nest egg for Kansas City. He found no takers for the Air Dome, which he simply had to leave on the market; but he was able to terminate his leases on his office and the Ramsey Opera House. (The Air Dome remained unused and was finally plowed under several years later and the land sold for back taxes. New management took over the Opera House and ran it unsuccessfully until it was destroyed by fire in 1919. The Cassin home at 804 D Avenue still stands as of this writing, but it has recently fallen within an industrial zone and is likely to be razed.)

Billie was an explorer. While Hal pouted and Anna fretted, Billie lay excitedly awake counting mysterious towns that wheeled by outside the train. Her hopes were pinned on a nebulous future that was sure to be better than the past.

At one point, she caught sight of Daddy Cassin's fully dressed legs and distinctively small shoes as he walked past her pullman drapes. She followed him to the smoking car. There she sat on his knee, and he told the truth about Kansas City—that they would have to live frugally until he found work, that a top priority would be placing Billie and Hal in school, that ballet classes would have to wait even if her foot was well enough, that Billie would have to be patient.

To explorer Billie Cassin, Union Station in Kansas City was Valhalla. Nothing in small-town Lawton had prepared her for the scale of it. The building overwhelmed Henry, too.

Completed just two years previously, the towering marble hall impresed most Kansas Citians as well. It was the largest railroad station in America outside of New York's. Built by a coalition of thirteen railroads for a total cost of $50 million dollars, it was a cathedral of commerce, a cavern of columns, arches, marble, and pieces of art. From the day it opened, it was the hub of transportation for middle America. It serviced 350 trains in a good day, 140,000 cars of livestock in a profitable year, and at peak, 8 million passengers per year. Around its perimeter were stalls, booths, and shops; merchants hawked everything from bonbons to automobiles. Ragtime piano, often from the newest Scott Joplin sheet music, jingled gaily into the reverberant hall from a booth that sold music for a nationally prominent Kansas City publisher.

Henry and Anna must have reacted strongly, and with opposite feelings, to this "low-life" sound being accepted with such abandon by big-city people, who even *lined up* to buy their copies of the new rags. Chautauqua-mentality Lawton would never permit such a thing! One can imagine Henry and Billie being delighted by the sunshiny music, and Anna falling into a gloom of disapproval.

A taxi—probably one of the ubiquitous open Model T Fords—took the Cassin family with their cartons and luggage, to the New Midland Hotel where Henry had made reservations.

The New Midland was a dump on a dumpy street: 407 East Ninth, in old downtown K.C.—a region of old hotels, greasy lunch counters, a number of saloons, and wooden signs that needed paint. A post office and an imposing public library lent some dignity to the

area. The street was declining, but it was fairly clean. There were wandering indigents, but not too many of them. And there was music! It came from the New Midland lobby.

The lobby was threadbare but dusted; it smelled faintly of lye. The music—more ragtime—was being played by an energetic black ensemble. Henry quickly determined that the lobby was occasionally made available to local musicians as a free rehearsal hall, and that hotel management sold beer and pastries to those who would stroll in to listen. The "music lovers" there were of the sort that could not have afforded to attend dance emporiums or concert halls.

Joan remembered that her mother constantly complained that she could not tolerate that "foul-smelling" and "common" place. Anna surely registered her first complaint as she boarded the shaky wrought-iron cage of an elevator that took the family of four to their single room on the third floor of the small hotel.

When he had settled his family in their quarters, Henry returned to the musical lobby to use the public phone. He called the Horner-Redpath office. They were booking agents who packaged Chautauquas and often supplied Henry with individual acts for his theaters. Henry spoke to an acquaintance of several years, who said the office would be delighted to meet with him to discuss employment the following morning. Henry's expectations rose; it did not sound as if they had heard about his trouble in Lawton.

But they had. The next morning he returned from his appointment dejected. His friend had told him, "I have to say that you'd better look for work outside the show business."

Henry asked Anna if she would be willing to work part time to cushion them while he looked for the right job. She said no.

Shortly thereafter, Anna took Billie and Hal to see the principal at Scarritt Elementary School at Lexington and Askew streets in northeast Kansas City. They hopped an electric streetcar for part of the distance and walked the rest.

The principal of Scarritt, a Mrs. Barbee, looked over the results of Billie and Hal's written and oral tests and determined that Billie would enter the third grade. "Even at that," large and authoritative Mrs. Barbee said to quiet, diminutive Mrs. Cassin, "the girl will have to apply herself diligently." Mrs. Barbee broke the news that Oklahoma schools were not as demanding at that time as were Missouri's and that neither child was up to par. She saw promise in Hal, however, and recommended he enter at the sixth-grade level at a different school—Humbolt Secondary, where he could remain through high school.

Billie was mortified. She lapsed into her sullen and uncommunicative mood and went off to cry for hours after she learned that she would have to walk to school every day because they would not be able to afford streetcar fare. Her foot still troubled her; the distance was thirty-two blocks.

Things were off to a bad start. The "explorer" philosophy she shared with Henry Cassin did not seem to be paying off. Damn those missed school days and that broken bottle! As exciting as the big city was, it was disturbing and dangerous, a far cry from the universe she had just left, which was only a few blocks square and two stories tall.

FIVE

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Anna Belle Cassin had been raised on the ethics of fundamentalist Southern Prostestantism and by her teens had soured on the dogma. She had not profited from those years of Wednesday prayer meetings, steamy tent revivals, and fire-and-brimstone sermons; and she saw no point in exposing her children to such guilty confusions. Henry had tried to take his family to an occasional Catholic service but, noting their absence of enthusiasm, had given up. Something in the solemnity, pageantry, benevolence, and forgiveness of the church evidently appealed to him.

In Kansas City he located a downtown church, St. Patrick's, and attended mass every month or so. It may be that Henry's main reason for going was to escape, into a peaceful haven, from Anna. Or to escape the perpetual worry of supporting his dependents.

He had not found employment. There were few

jobs available for a man in his late thirties; and he was not physically or psychologically equipped for manual labor. He expected eventually to find a saleman's position of some kind. Show business was closed to him, and it served as a very poor reference.

A respite from his constant money worries came when the proprietor of the New Midland Hotel, Cora Tyler—a sturdy, gravel-voiced woman—asked Henry if he or Ann would care to work the hotel desk from time to time. The Cassins were among the few who had stayed at the fleabag hotel for longer than a few days—or hours.

Anna so despised the place that she would set foot in the lobby only on her way out for air or food, or—as she did once in a while—to go out searching for a respectable house in a good neighborhood. Though Henry suggested he and Anna both accept Mrs. Tyler's offer, he alone took the night shift at the desk.

A routine developed. Anna made hot dinners for her family on kerosene hotplates in their rooms. Billie delivered a plate to Daddy downstairs. When the children left for school the next morning, they would hear Daddy snoring. Henry arose around noon, read a paper over coffee and toast, endured as many of Anna's complaints as possible, and left to walk through yet another part of town looking for "suitable" work or, more often, just to walk the downtown streets marvelling at the number of doors closed to him.

One day a check for several thousand dollars arrived for Henry Cassin. It was the final payment on the Lawton property.

"There's this house on Armour Boulevard . . ." Anna announced.

Henry looked at it with her. He listened to her recitation of its virtues: it was among beautiful homes, near Westport High, in an area rich with fountains and greenery, far from the smells and ugliness of downtown, and so on. The real estate agent quoted an appropriate price with a bankrupting down payment.

Riding back to the New Midland, on a long yellow electric streetcar that whined like a giant generator, Anna waited for Henry's commment. His silence was her answer. They engaged in a knock-down-drag-out without speaking or moving, not so much as the narrowing of eyes—each accurately imagining both halves of the unspoken dialogue. As the streetcar approached Ninth, the pair rose in unison to disembark. "With *both* of us working," said Henry, "we might be able to afford something for about half that."

Henry invested the entire amount of the check in a lease arrangement with Cora Tyler. The Cassins would take over the running of the hotel and live there indefinitely.

Around that time, the term at Scarritt Elementary ended. The year had been difficult for both children, but especially bad for Billie. Unwilling to admit to the others that she was a year or two behind, she refused to make friends. In her own mind, she convinced herself that she was becoming a young woman while the nitwits on the playground were babies; but her imagined superiority had to remain her secret. The scholastic work was impossible at first; and Billie sat shyly at the back of classes, her head swimming with unrelated facts, and a knot always in her stomach.

The assistant principal, H.S. Walter, took an interest in Billie and other pupils who had transferred to

Scarrit from out of town. He counseled them to try to surpass their friends in order to catch up. He had some success with Billie, who took home extra work to occupy her dreary evenings in a family drained of every drop of gaiety. Billie fought with Hal. Anna fought with Henry. Billie was so ignored by her mother that she would have welcomed punishment as attention. Truces consisted of ferocious cold shoulders.

To make matters worse, her foot had not healed satisfactorily. After her first attempt to walk to and from school, she had lain in bed for a week with terrible pain. Thereafter, Billy took the streetcar and Hal walked. Hal was resentful and ridiculed her.

At school, wrote biographer Moffitt in 1932, Billie faced "armies of children" who marched "to the sound of invisible bells." Compared to the little school in Lawton, Scarritt had "miles of blackboard." Moffitt wrote: "Her former teachers will tell you they sometimes detect a fleeting look of timidity in the midst of Joan Crawford's most assured performances today. It is as though she were not the cocksure film darling, but a girl pitifully eager to please and hungry for encouragement. They say they saw that look cross the face of the little girl from Lawton as she looked up at them, not quite sure of herself, across the shiny, varnished desks in the schoolroom."

Billie stoically accepted her father's verdict that until her foot and his finances improved, there could be no dance classes. Also out of the picture were backyard theatricals, neighborhood boys to play "Indians" with, and the backstage world she and Cassin shared. She found nothing in Kansas City to replace such fundamental pleasures; nothing at school, and the second-

rate combos that used the hotel lobby for a rehearsal hall were hardly show business at all. They all mangled "Alexander's Ragtime Band" over and over until even Henry begged them to try something else.

The school term ended for Billie in humiliation. Hal was advanced to the seventh grade; she might have to remain in the third.

Cora Tyler told a friend, who told a relative, and down the line to this day, about an evening that stood out in her mind. It made her wonder if turning the hotel over to the Cassins had been a good idea. Anna's resolve not to work had cracked, and she was at the reception desk late one night. A piano player was tinkering a tune that had recently become very popular in Kansas City, the "Missouri Waltz." Billie danced to it among the lushes and losers flopped in the lobby. Making a nuisance of herself, she behaved like a miniature Pavlova from a nearby funny farm. Each time she dipped past the piano she banged out a jarring note.

"It's past your bedtime, Lucille," her mother grumbled hopelessly.

"No it isn't," said Billie.

Anna made no attempt at discipline (Cora Tyler had the impression that Mrs. Cassin let her daughter run wild). Anna watched Billie poke a finger through a newspaper a guest was reading then returned her weary attention to the task of writing up recent cases of guests who had vanished via the fire escape without paying.

"I'm going to be a toe dancer," Billie announced, out of breath, to the piano player.

"That's real nice," he answered. He was a large black man in a shabby gray suit. (He played well;

Henry offered him the piano, "whenever it's idle." No one remembers his name.) He smiled at Billie and stepped up the tempo of his waltz.

Billie laughed and ran and danced. She bumped into a large cut glass, fringed floor lamp, and it nearly fell.

The music stopped. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Cassin," said the musician.

Suddenly Billie cried out and slumped to the floor. She grabbed her injured foot. The look on her face was one of anger more than of pain. "Play it again," she insisted.

"Better not, Billie," said the friendly black man.

"Yes!" she fairly screamed. She lashed out and swept a potted vine off a side table. It shattered and spilled.

Billie stared at the debris from her tantrum and quickly calmed. She shuffled around the lobby, limping a little, to prove that she was in no way contrite. Then she sidled to the elevator and went up to bed.

That same evening, perhaps within minutes of Billie's departure, Henry returned to the hotel so drunk that he tripped over the ragged oriental carpet in the center of the lobby and fell with a thud. He lay there. Anna ignored him. After a few minutes he staggered to the elevator.

That was the last day Cora Tyler—who had remained to train Henry and Anna—worked at the New Midland.

In September, Henry took his daughter to St. Agnes Academy—a cube-shaped prison of a building at the corner of Hardesty and Scarritt, fifteen blocks beyond the elementary school. Henry talked to the

Mother Superior while Billie waited in an anteroom. Then it was Billie's turn. She was quizzed by a cold, mechanical, black-shrouded old woman who had the power of a hypnotist. Billie answered her dully, in a daze, because Daddy wanted her to; but she was frightened.

On their way back to the hotel, Cassin told his daughter that she would soon move to the school to live and work and study there. Several problems were solved, among them the need for Billie to walk or ride to school, and the question of her grade: she would be admitted to the fourth.

"I think they'll be very strict, Billie, and I want you to obey them," he told her. He bent close to speak above the rumbling whine of the streetcar. "They'll insist on your being a good girl."

She nodded absently, wondering why he made an issue of it.

"This will be for the best," he said apologetically. "You'll learn, and I won't have to worry. If anything should happen. Do you understand?"

Billie said she did, but full understanding did not come until a few weeks later, after she had begun her term at St. Agnes.

She hid from the nuns until it was safe and then escaped—as she had seen other girls do—down the back stairs. She hadn't the price of streetcar fare; she walked back to the hotel.

Daddy wasn't there. Neither were his clothes.

"He's gone for good," Anna said in a tone that further implied, and good riddance.

"Where did he go?" Billie asked, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I don't know." And I don't care.

"What are we going to do?"

"We'll manage." Better than before.

Years later, Joan recalled that "he and my mother had separated and were to be divorced, but Hal and I weren't told. He was just gone. I missed Daddy and kept on missing him." And in another interview she said, "I was old enough to realize how she drove Henry out of her life, out of our lives. I don't even think I can blame my real father for deserting us; she must have made life hell for him, too."

SIX

Joan Crawford frequently mentioned her life at St. Agnes Academy, a convent school. In her autobiography she states, "Because Daddy Cassin was Catholic I had been sent to a school I liked very much, St. Agnes Academy." That is one of her very few complimentary remarks about it; and she quickly adds, "What I did not enjoy about St. Agnes was being relegated to the position of an outcast. . . . The minute I started serving them [the other girls] at table it was a step down into the menial class." In *My Way of Life,* she repeats her complaint: ". . . washing dishes, cooking for the entire establishment, making beds, waiting on tables—and trying to get some studying in between. But there was precious little time for books. I got to classes only two or three times a year."

In later years, Joan's recollections of St. Agnes

were sometimes confused and contradictory, as the sampling below indicates:

"I was there about a year when Mother came for me. There was no money; she and Daddy had separated." (1928)

"I begged so hard to stay that they let me wait on tables to pay my tuition. I finished grammar school in that manner." (1928)

"Although my father owned a theater, he refused to even think of permitting me to train for a theatrical career, but his resistance merely served to whet my desire to seek fame on the stage. This predilection became even more strongly attached to me while I was attending finishing school in Kansas City." (1930)

"Worst of all—they wouldn't let me dance!" (1932)

"I graduated from St. Agnes, a grammar school, and prepared to go elsewhere to high school." (1932)

"This early experience with people who like you for what you have and not for what you are has made me cynical about friendships to this day." (1942)

"What I didn't love was being an outcast." (1942)

"Since St. Agnes was a primary school, another had to be found for me when I finished the sixth grade." (1942)

"I felt singled out for punishment." (1945)

There are numerous similar statements attributed to Crawford by her many biographers. But from other evidence available in Kansas City, (and from contrary remarks made by Crawford herself), it appears that most of these "facts" are substantially false.

As can be easily ascertained from official records, St. Agnes was a full-term school, elementary through

high school; so whatever Billie's reason for leaving, it was not because of a need for more education than the school offered.

"Some of the Sisters have been so upset and hurt by things Lucille said about the school," said a nun who was at St. Agnes as a student, then as a teacher, and ultimately as Mother Superior. "I don't know why she felt she had to say such things. She was so successful, it's sad that she didn't present a more positive image for young people."

That charming and dignified woman, Sister Mary Aquinas, now resides at a nursing home near Kansas City. She was among several who were happy to "set the record straight," albeit several decades late.

Sister Aquinas was three years younger than Billie Cassin; she arrived at St. Agnes as an eighth grade student in 1922—and there were stories about the wild little girl who had been at the school until recently. When Sister Aquinas began teaching at the school some years later, her roommate at the Convent was Sister Mary Annunciata Simpson, who had been Billie's mentor and advisor. The two nuns remained close until Sister Annunciata's death; they spoke often about the Cassin girl, then about Joan Crawford.

"Lucille was at St. Agnes in about the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades. She was never very truthful about her age. She was *not* made to feel like a slave. The Sisters sacrificed to make her feel loved and to teach her. They could see that she had talent, and she was given singing lessons, dancing lessons, elocution, drama. It was very common for there to be music and dance recitals, and Lucille was often permitted to participate. She never once credited the Sisters with that.

"Sister Mary Annunciata told me Lucille was never appreciative of what she was given. Instead she seemed resentful; she never thought she had been given enough. Lucille always said she was a slave. Maybe she did feel that way, but she had no reason to."

St. Agnes was not quite the kind of school Joan represented it to be. Hardly a "finishing school" for rich kids, it was started at another location, in 1901, by the Sisters of Mercy, to be a charity institution serving Kansas City's "Little Italy." At least *half* the girls in attendance there in most years were non-paying students on work scholarships. "And yet at the same time, St. Agnes was the best Catholic school of the Midwest, with a fine reputation for scholastic excellence," said Annabelle McInerney of the Catholic Diocese of Kansas City and St. Joseph.

"Some girls did pay tuition," said another nun, "but the Cassin girl never did." (Records, if there were any, of Billie's years would be at the Diocese, but none have been kept from that far back.)

"Each of the girls," said Sister Aquinas, "was given housekeeping duties—whether they were paying students or not. The same kinds of chores. And it was never mentioned which students paid and which did not. If her friends knew Lucille was on charity, *she* must have told them."

Rosemary Coughlin attended St. Agnes later than Billie but under similar circumstances. She rallied to defend Joan Crawford. She said, "I worked day and night. I washed dishes, cooked, made coffee, did maid's work for the nuns—and, oh, how I hated working in the laundry. And I'll never forget all that white tile to scrub, and the bathtubs with individual legs.

"I'm sure it was a good school, and I got something of an education, but cleaning duties did make scholastics difficult. When it came time to study, all I wanted to do was sleep. I kept thinking, 'Maybe someday I'll get away from here!' Part of it may have been that I was a very undisciplined child. But it was the most down time in my life. Somebody was always riding you. I could cry even now thinking about it.

"You have to remember, though, that those were very different times, a really different generation."

There were four playmates who went to St. Agnes, another woman remembered, who vowed eternal friendship. But only a few years later, when three of them chanced to meet the missing fourth, the fourth had to be reminded who the three were. "Finally it all came back to her, and she started to cry. She said her four years at St. Agnes had been so awful she had literally blocked them out of her memory."

Sister Aquinas was Mother Superior when St. Agnes celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. A plea for contributions went out to all the alumni, including such famous graduates as Harriett Hilliard and Barbara Lawrence, along with an invitation to attend. Back came generous checks and many testimonial letters.

"Joan Crawford wrote a scathing reply," said Sister Aquinas, "in which she said she never wanted to see St. Agnes again and would certainly not donate anything. The letter was very rude."

"Crawford was right," said the woman with the three friends. "I'd be danged if I'd donate a quarter."

Another St. Agnes teacher remembered Billie specifically. "She knew how to put on makeup but not how to brush her teeth or take a bath. She was like a wild

thing that had to be broken. In fact, they called her 'that thing,' and they talked about her for years, even before she was famous. That *thing*."

Pieces of the puzzle have been supplied by a dozen or more who were there or who have heard. A picture of Billie's better times at St. Agnes can be assembled.

The school building, which no longer stands, was four stories high; the ground floor was faced in stone, the upper stories in red brick. The top floor was the dormitory for thirty boarders in three rooms that had, respectively, fifteen, ten, and five beds. The majority of pupils were "day students" who lived at home and were not as burdened with housekeeping duties as the boarders. On other floors of the building were classrooms, offices, a dining room called Alexian Hall that also served as a theater, and, in a satellite building, water heaters, steam boilers, and laundry machines.

A huge staircase zigzagged from the foyer to the fourth floor, and up and down its deep well could be heard the whispers and giggles of girls who made echoing ticking sounds as their feet hurried them from place to place. That stairwell was a prankster's funhouse, and almost daily something messy would splat on the marble of the ground floor. "It might have been Billie who discovered how to drop oil-cloth bags of water down there," a former student of the school reported. "She used to do it and usually got caught."

The water sometimes splashed so far that it sprinkled the statue of St. Agnes in the entranceway or the huge clock there that chimed on the hour.

At the rear of the building was an enclosed stairway and a fire escape. Billie used the fire escape repeatedly for the first few months to slip away and walk

back to town, to the New Midland Hotel, where she cried and complained about her cruel treatment at the hands of the unfathomable women in black and white who dominated her life.

But back at the hotel, Daddy Cassin was gone, and Mother and Hal offered little or no sympathy. Eventually life seemed better at the convent than at home. "I didn't want to go home with Mother if Daddy wasn't there," Joan told *Photoplay*.

In contrast to Joan's contention, in her biography, that she got to classes only once or twice a year, she told a *Ladies' Home Journal* interviewer that "it was necessary for me to leave the last morning class before it was over so as to set the tables for luncheon. I missed the first class after lunch because of the dishes."

James Miller, whose story about her touches a period later in Billie's life, said, "Billie might not have been a very good student, but when she was so popular with the fellows, she conversed intelligently and could sometimes be very refined. I think she learned it at that Catholic school, because she had not yet gone to Stephens College."

The snobbishness of rich kids might have had something to do with Billie's unhappy times, but more serious turmoil probably stemmed from Billie's native uncertainty and shyness. "If I thought the girls didn't like me," Joan said in a 1928 interview, "I would run and hide rather than ask them to play with me." She seems to have retreated into the very work she claims to have detested. She also wrote: "I waited on tables, made beds, washed dishes—and enjoyed it! I still enjoy housework, strangely enough." And at another time: "I have never been afraid of hard work, and I must admit

that I did not hunger and thirst after learning. That was to come later." And: "Scrubbing and cooking were better for me than algebra, I'm sure."

Waxing the wood of the stair banisters, on her knees cleaning bathroom tiles, sweating in the laundry-room steam, in the kitchen tiring from elbow grease, the plump, tearfully alone little girl was free from decisions, difficulties in the classroom, and the urge to be sociable. She was free to imagine and remember and dream, free to indulge her every whim in the privacy of her thoughts.

(Later, when Joan Crawford's career was in eclipse during the war years, she retreated as she had as a girl. "I cooked the meals, took care of the children. While they slept, I scrubbed floors, washed diapers, lined shelves with paper, scrubbed cupboards and still wasn't tired," she wrote in *Portrait of Joan.* These simple, tiring, rote tasks meant discipline to her; and discipline was virtue. She insisted that her "advantaged" children respect the purifying effect of drudgery, as she had been forced to. In her autobiography she also said, "They assist me cooking and serving, we make all our beds, dust our rooms and tidy up, wash our undies and hose. My three girls were taught to wash and iron; all the children learned to take their soiled clothes to the laundry room after baths as soon as they could walk. When they were old enough, they dusted and vacuumed their own rooms.")

Little Billie's thoughts, as she worked, surely strayed to the theatrical presentations that involved her talents no less than eleven times in the almost three years she spent at St. Agnes.

There was one performance in particular. It was

the spring of 1918 and Billie had just turned thirteen. Now in the fifth grade, she was surviving scholastically and thriving in the arts. She had been made the leader of the Maypole dance in the big year-end recital, The St. Agnes Revue; it was to take place not in the school's Alexian Hall but in downtown Kansas City at the Old Orpheum, a vaudeville theater that was sometimes made available for schools and conservatories. A real theater!

The maypole, a bamboo bundle, was too tall for school ceilings, so rehearsals were held outdoors, in back, by the grotto of stone and greenery that was a shrine to St. Mary, whose memorial month is May. At rehearsal, the normally shy and mischievous Billie took charge.

"They'll lower the pole from the flyloft—that's the space over the stage—and we'll all reach out and take a ribbon," Billie instructed. "Everybody remember your colors!"

Twelve girls in their blue-and-white Academy uniforms, backed away from the pole with ribbons in hand and waited for further instruction.

The dance teacher, Miss Mattie Inzerillo, looked on approvingly. She said, "Don't bend at the knees, girls! Walk slowly in a circle, chins up, with dignity, all at the same speed or the pole will pull at an angle. Legs like stilts! Supple waists! Arms light as air! Nice, Alberta. Faster, Tina. Good, Billie!"

Sister Mary Xavier, her habit flouncing in the cold breeze, watched from the sidelines. She was chorus director; her girls would be singing while all this was going on.

Mary Trenolone, a senior student and a very thin,

tall, dark-haired girl, pirouetted into the canopy of slowly revolving ribbons—in and out among the girls in the circle. She would dance the leading part on point (something Billie would never be able to do), but she did not wear toe shoes here on the damp greening grass. Yellow and white jonquils in the grotto's circular flower beds bent in the wind and seemed to be part of the choreography. The waving trees were budding but not green. The sun was amber toward sundown; its warm light made the fluttering ribbons glow.

After dinner, when chores were done, Billie joined the other dancers and some of their mothers in the chorus room. The costumes had arrived.

Scraps of velvet, silk, tulle, and cotton had been scrounged from merchants and parents; and with help from adults, the children had made roughly matching romantic tutus to represent the months of the year. Billie's was all white—to represent January—making her the most distinctive apart from Mary Trenolone, whose mother had made her into a flower-bedecked Mother Nature. Billie must have been reminded of *Giselle,* and of the ballerina backstage in Lawton.

Three days later, the St. Agnes *corps de ballet*—their costumes mended, fitted, and tucked under their arms—walked the block to the streetcar stop at Denver and St. John, across from Holy Cross, the church that ministered to Catholic northeast Kansas City and the St. Agnes girls. They piled onto a mud-streaked yellow streetcar whose tracks led to Ninth and May, and Billie's first appearance on a Kansas City stage.

The girls crossed a cracked sidewalk, walked through towering brass and glass doors into a lobby of vaulted arches. The paint was flaking, and it smelled of

mildew. The chandeliers were big as houses, and only about half the bulbs worked. There were Art Nouveau poster cases with dusty old posters in some of them: FLICKERS FOR A FRIDAY NIGHT—THE PERILS OF PAULINE PLUS SELECTED STAGE ATTRACTIONS. CHAMPAGNE BURLESQUE: A NIGHT IN THE TROPICS. DIRECT FROM THE GREAT WHITE WAY—SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE—WRITTEN, PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY GEORGE M. COHAN. A recent poster in the case nearest the ticket window said: BENEFIT TO MOURN THE PASSING OF THE GREAT SCOTT JOPLIN, SON OF MISSOURI. (Although Joplin, composer of "Maple Leaf Rag," "The Entertainer," and scores of phenomenally popular pieces, was born in Texarkana and was claimed by both Texas and Louisiana, Missouri appropriated him because he had lived in St. Louis and attained international fame when his music was the rage at the St. Louis World's Fair of 1904. He died completely bankrupt in 1917. His classical ragtime was already giving way to formulaic imitations flicking from Tin Pan Alley like popcorn.) A red-white-and-blue banner spanned the lobby announcing: WAR BOND RALLY EVERY SATURDAY!! COME ONE, COME ALL!! FREE SHOWS!!

Except for nonprofit affairs, the old Orpheum had been abandoned since 1914 when the new Orpheum on Baltimore opened its doors. But the old structure was still a work of art, though a creaking one. The auditorium was scalloped with gold-edged boxes and balconies, and the proscenium was an opulent shadowbox of sculptures and entwining patterns.

Two hundred or so relatives and friends of the school children were clustered in front and center; they applauded as the musty grand curtain rose to re-

veal a scene bright with paper flowers, colored lights, and childish smiles.

Billie looked out into the dark cavern where there were glints from brass and gold in the distance; she felt the way others said they felt in church.

The maypole ribbons did not tangle; nobody fell; the St. Agnes production was a success in every way imaginable. But Billie returned to school on the brink of tears. For one thing, that Mary Trenolone was the only dancer the audience really liked. For another, Billie's mother had come to the performance with a man Billie had never seen before.

Billie sat at the back of the streetcar and refused to speak to a soul. She acted as if she expected the rumbling platform to carry her to the edge of the earth and dump her off.

That man. When Billie was introduced to him after the show, she had instinctively disliked him. She had disliked the previous three boyfriends as well, but this one was the worst of all. He was not handsome. He was tall and trim, but his clothes were not stylish. His collar was a little frayed, and his vest was old. And there was no humor hiding in his eyes. Mama said his name was Harry Hough (she pronounced it "Huff" and spelled it out to make sure Billie remembered), and the way Anna looked at him made Billie fear that she really might never see her Daddy Cassin again.

Billie—her excited chums boisterous around her—resolved grimly to find Henry Cassin before it was too late. Somehow. Beginning now. She had danced just for him tonight, and he wasn't there.

She peered out at the splashes of light in all-electric downtown Kansas City and studied every small round man as he diminished into the distance.

SEVEN

One of the Kansas City ladies with St. Agnes connections (but only one of them) remembered that there was "some scandal about Lucille stealing money from another student." If there is truth behind the story, Billie might have pinched streetcar money. Rides cost a nickel.

Billie had tolerated almost perpetual pain in order to eliminate her limp. It was a secret pride she saved to share with Daddy Cassin. But although her foot was hers again, miles-long hikes on brick and concrete could still incapacitate her.

She completely rejected the thought that Cassin might have left town. He was there, and she would find him. She just knew it.

With the world at war since the previous April and the town on the lookout for German spies, Billie imagined herself an investigator with a mission as noble as

any carried out by a Yank undermining Kaiser Bill. What she was doing took stealth, vigilance, perceptiveness, and placing herself above the (St. Agnes) law.

The easiest missions were those that could be combined with school functions—especially the periodic outings when nuns would take their special charges for rides to the end of streetcar line number 40, all the way to the big transport barn at the Montgomery Ward building at Forty-seventh and Woodland. Billie refused to socialize or sing with the girls; instead she would station herself at the back of the car and survey the sidewalk along the six-mile trip. Had she spotted Henry Cassin, she would have defied her supervisors and leaped off at the next stop. And when school released her for weekends, she would wander in and out, to and from the New Midland, walking new routes each time.

Other excursions were more risky. One day she completed her housekeeping duties and, as she had done before, slipped away down the back fire escape. She took two streetcars and arrived at Union Station in the middle of the afternoon.

Something was wrong with the world. The station was not the gay and futuristic palace it had seemed when Billie and her family had arrived from Lawton. Now it was a hollow marble barn over a brown sea of sad soldiers. Music was drowned out by men with megaphones; and those weren't babies crying, they were grown women.

Some things were the same. Little boys still hawked newspapers and shoeshines; flower carts still rattled over the marble; sunlight still flooded through the towering arched windows, with particles sparkling in the beams.

Billie headed for the sheet music alcove. She knew Daddy Cassin was acquainted with the lady who played the piano there—and there the lady was, standing beside her spinet surveying the disinterested crowd. She recognized Billie and said she had not seen Henry in some months. Perhaps Billie should inquire at the Horner–Redpath Chautauqua office.

Billie found that office an exciting hive of show-business comings and goings, where only one person admitted he remembered Henry Cassin. That man reminded Billie that her father owed him money, and suggested that Henry must have skipped town.

After one such excursion, Billie returned to school as the sky was darkening, sneaked back up the fire escape, and learned from a dorm-mate that her mother was downstairs in the principal's office.

Billie ran downstairs. She tried to get close enough to listen through the door but was apprehended and made to wait in the anteroom. Much as Billie hated classes, resented the authority of the teachers, and felt uncomfortable with her schoolmates, she dreaded being expelled and sent home.

(In all Joan's own dramatizations of what transpired that day, she claimed it marked the beginning of her days as a charity student. The version that follows is altered by accounts from sisters and friends of St. Agnes.)

The principal's office, to which Billie was no stranger, was dark and small. A painting of St. Anthony hung on the mahogony panels opposite the one leaded-glass window. The principal, also Mother Superior in matters of faith, sat behind a small desk, and was a hooded, silhouetted shape against the window;

but Billie knew that hidden face, remembered those wounded eyes that blamed the world for being imperfect while simultaneously forgiving it. Anna Cassin sat in a high-backed chair opposite the principal. Billie stood at the side of the desk between them.

"Lucille," the principal began in a low, kindly tone, "your mother tells me it will be necessary for you to leave St. Agnes."

Billie flashed an angry glance at her mother.

"We've lost the hotel," Anna told her daughter.

The principal added, "You will be needed to help with the family business, Lucille."

"You said we lost the hotel," Billie said to her mother, expressing nothing more than curiosity.

"I've taken a position with a laundry."

Billie recalled the drudgery of her work in the St. Agnes laundry, imagined being permanently trapped in such a situation with her mother and Hal, and burst into tears. Billie gravitated toward the nun for comfort, and to her surprise, the comfort came: the "old ogre" used her hypnotic voice on Anna. "Lucille has made progress here, Mrs. Cassin. It would be wrong to remove her now."

Anna stared off into space. "All right," she said, "for a little while." Anna's Southern accent made her voice delicate and sweet.

When Anna had left, Mother Superior said to Billie, "You left without permission again today; you shall work extra duties. And if there is no improvement in your deportment over the summer, you shall be expelled. You are dismissed. Wash that rouge off your lips."

Billie laughed delightedly, wiped her eyes, and ran from the sanctum.

That principal and other nuns discussed the incident, and today it is said that the sisters kept Billie at St. Agnes specifically to shield her from the influence of her mother. "They all knew what sort of low-life Anna Cassin was, and what kind of home she would have provided for Lucille," said a woman in the Catholic chancery office in Kansas City. "When Lucille finally did leave," said a former instructor at St. Agnes, "the sisters were unhappy about it; for they believed she was beginning to learn. I don't think any of them liked her, though."

The following weekend Billie learned just what a providential reprieve she had obtained. She visited the new laundry.

The sign over the door read THE EDMONDS GEORGIA LAUNDRY AGENCY, though within a week or so it would be changed to THE CITY GATE LAUNDRY AGENCY. When Billie first stood at the door, a sign painter was lettering very long business hours on the clear pane.

Just across the street, the New Midland Hotel had not changed. The same customers would be checking in with a new manager behind the desk; the same bottom-of-the-barrel bands would go on spilling suggestive sounds into the street. Billie had come to hate the neighborhood. "Bad women; terrible men," Joan wrote. "I couldn't cross the street without men trying to speak to me and looking at me strangely."

The previous occupants of the laundry were not tidy people; and there was work to be done—the kind at which Billie was practiced. With other families there

might have been camaraderie, whistling while they worked, a happy sense of common purpose. "But," reported Joan, "Hal and Mother and I no longer had anything to say to each other." The mysterious Mr. Hough came by Sunday morning and helped with the heavier moving. Billie had the distinct impression that he did not like her.

Anna explained, "Mr. Hough is the chief delivery man for City Gate. You can thank him for getting me this position."

The explanation made him no more appealing to Billie. She was more inclined to blame him than to thank him.

When she left to return to school Sunday night, Billie left a much cleaner laundry shop; but it looked as depressing as it had before they started. The small front business room and the living quarters in back both needed patches of lath and plaster and paint; and no amount of simple cleaning could make the place homey. The single back room was the living room, bedroom, and work room for ironing, folding, and packaging. (The washing was done at bulk machines at the central City Gate plant on Tenth Street.) The toilet in the tiny bathroom was plugged up. There were roaches everywhere.

Billie was late returning to school, and the nuns gave her extra clean-up duty.

Sometime that summer, probably toward the end of it, Billie found her daddy. Joan said she walked through downtown Kansas City looking at the pavement, watching the feet. "Daddy Cassin had very small feet, and he was very special about his shoes. The

streets were so crowded I was afraid I'd miss his face, but I couldn't miss his shoes. And suddenly, in the midst of all those feet, I walked straight into them!"

All at once the streets weren't crowded anymore. Henry lifted Billie off the ground and hugged her—something he seldom had done—then grabbed her hand and navigated with her through milling people, honking Model Ts, and a lane of horse-drawn carts delivering bread, beer, milk, and vegetables to lunch counters. He pulled her through the cut-glass doors of Wolferman's Delicatessen and Ice-Cream Parlor and sat her at a lacy wrought-iron table.

"Whatever you want," he announced. "Price is no object!"

"Did you get a job?" she asked.

He laughed. "I'm doing fine. Tell me about *you.*"

She told him about her triumph at the Orpheum. Yes, she loved Kansas City. No, she didn't have a boyfriend. Yes, she was happy at St. Agnes. No, Mama lost the hotel and was working at a laundry.

When her Daddy paid for their ice-cream sodas, Billie saw him first check his thin wallet and then dig into his watch pocket for change. Their check took most of it. About to put the rest back, he asked Billie, "How did you get here, little girl?"

"I walked," she said proudly.

He didn't ask any more about her foot; he merely smiled broadly, which was the only congratulations Billie needed. She grinned back. He handed her the last of his change. "Then you shall ride back in style!"

"Thank you!" she said, her eyes dampening. "I could meet you here again sometime. You don't have to see Mother."

"That's a deal, Billie. I'll call you at school and we'll make a date sometime soon, I promise." He was crying when he said it, so Billie believed him. But she never saw him again. (And thereafter his name does not appear in Kansas City directories.)

Seeing him just that once, however, had a liberating, focusing effect. All those things that weighed Billie down and made her feel inadequate became less important. She had done it! She had set herself an impossible goal and accomplished it. She had found him, and he still loved and believed in her! What were demerits, reprimands, derisions, and failures stacked up against that?

Ironically, her new-found confidence must have caused Billie to shirk her duties and flaunt her ability to evade punishment. She accumulated so many demerits that she would have been working them off until she was thirty if she had stayed at St. Agnes. Her game was to cooperate just enough to seem cooperative. She thought she knew where to draw that line.

With religious services twice daily and a required course of Bible study, Billie was more than casually exposed to the dictates of Christianity. She was dunked in it. Resistant to authority figures in black-and-white habits, she also abhored the black-and-white absolutism on the printed page. Commandments made her squirm.

The curriculum at St. Agnes, however, was admirably scientific. In the spirit of St. Thomas Aquinas, the school taught that curiosity was healthy and that natural law could be reconciled with the poetry of the Scriptures. The new theories of Darwin, Freud, and Einstein—all of which challenged traditional theologi-

cal notions—were made available to the girls who cared to tackle them.

So was sex education. While Anna Cassin had been merely mystical and threatening about the "wicked soldier boys," the sisters at St. Agnes removed the mystery and, in a way, the threat. While condemning Emma Goldman's famous advocacy of "free love" and "an end to the double standard," and while expressing horror at the spread of birth control methods, the sisters necessarily had to explain what these things were. "All such devices," Billie heard, "undermine the family unit and reduce the urge to propagate God's humanity to a string of trivial and sinful pleasures." Billie was surely intrigued. The Catholic philosophy also carried with it the interesting possibility of being forgiven for almost anything. To Billie this was a blank check for experimentation. More—it was an invitation. It was a dare with a danger, but there was also a safety net.

Just a block away from St. Agnes, Billie discovered a verdant and pruned patch of country, Budd Park, that had four tennis courts, a sloping football field, a large and deep wading pool, grassy picnic grounds, a bandstand, and boys by the hundreds from nearby Northeast High School. By night some of the pathways were lighted with old gas lamps on green poles, and other paths were dark and overgrown.

"She had quite a wild reputation with the boys," said jazz musician Ernie Johnson, who went to Northeast High back then. "No one knows how early it got started."

"She used to sneak away to meet boys in the park," said Sister Aquinas.

"She was painfully shy and not a raving beauty,"

said Nellie Cook (whose story about Billie covers events a few years later). "It's not easy to see what power she had over men."

"She had that sultry something. She acted as if she had a secret," said a descendant of someone who knew her.

During her last year at St. Agnes, Billie met a teenager who practiced football with his friends in the park. However many others there might have been, he was the one she always talked about, the one who influenced her later. As so often happens in special friendships, they met in an ordinary way. She had been sitting on the grass late one afternoon watching the shirtless boys in knickers and long socks. There were other groups of girls watching, but Billie sat alone.

"Hi, Billie!" Wally Wood and Cliff Jordan yelled in unison.

She waved back at them. She saw them single out a gangly brown-headed fellow and confide in him. They pushed him in her direction. He resisted and returned to the game.

Billie rather liked him at first glance; he was even shyer then she was. She smiled at him later, and he turned away. A barreling player mowed him down and Billie laughed, but he didn't have much of a sense of humor about it. When he was idle on the sidelines, Billie ambled toward him.

"Have you two met?" Wally inquired, nudging the boy in her general direction. "Miss Cassin, may I present Ray Thayer Sterling. Ray . . . Miss Lucille Cassin. Everybody calls her Billie."

"Hello," Ray said with an icy nod.

Billie smiled.

Ray frowned at his friend Wally in a way Billie didn't like; then he ran back into the game.

In a single article that contradicts many other stories, Joan told an interviewer for *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1933: "I first met Ray while I was still at the Convent of St. Agnes in Kansas City. I was about thirteen and mature for my age, I suppose." In other versions Joan claimed she was thirteen when she met him, but that it was four or five years later, when she entered Stephens College.

The story has come down via Wally Wood that "the boys thought easy Billie was just what old Ray needed. He was a virgin and much too proud of it to suit them."

Billie probably saw Ray at other times in Budd Park, but it is doubtful that they spoke beyond forced pleasantries. The start of their unusual relationship was still a couple of years away. Her life still had several jagged turns to take. The first of them happened that year, when two events squeezed her into making an impulsive decision.

It was not long after the performance at the Orpheum. Anna had come to visit again. She and Billie sat by the fireplace in the drafty foyer. Anna said, "Billie, you have had more education than I ever did, and what good will it ever do you? I need your hands at the laundry. I can't afford to hire a fulltime helper. It's not fair for Hal and Mr. Hough to harm their health while you take life easy here. You'll come home."

Billie whined and argued and eventually suggested a compromise: she would return after the end of the present term—not before.

Shortly afterward, Mother Superior called Billie to

the office. St. Anthony stared down from the wall; there was an uncommon quiet in the paneled room. Mother Superior had bad news to tell the young girl: "I am forced to place you on probation, Lucille Cassin. Your conduct simply has not been acceptable here. We have extended to you every opportunity and every kindness, and you seemed determined to ignore them."

Billie was blinded by a surge of self-righteous anger. She pivoted on her heels and ran out the door. She hurried upstairs and packed her few belongings.

She left St. Agnes and never returned.

EIGHT

Word somehow spread that Henry Cassin had not abandoned his family; rather that he had died. The "widow" Cassin was running the Ninth Street agency of City Gate Laundry with only the help of her teenaged children. (Two early articles state that Anna and the kids moved to Kansas City when Henry died.)

Hal applied to the Board of Education for a work permit in the fall of 1918, and transferred from Humbolt School to Manual High, a trade school (now Westport Junior High). Billie, being a female in that era of male supremacy, was not expected to obtain a work permit or in other ways leave her mark on city records. She merely stayed at home and helped.

In 1918 Kansas City was a quieter and testier place than it had been. U.S. involvement in the World War was more than a year old. Epidemics of influenza were claiming more doughboys than were German bullets;

and at home some citizens' groups had taken to wearing gauze masks in public—a demoralizing sight. The women's suffrage movement had been temporarily derailed by omnipresent war-consciousness, but in Kansas City that September there was a demonstration that did the cause as much harm as good; their placards insulted super-patriotic observers by telling them that "Women Would Not Have Voted For War." While at the same time, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was vaguely implying that the sin of alcohol consumption had created the mentality that caused war, that the vile potion made Jekyll-and-Hydes of decent men. And more and more people listened to such notions; for apparently the world was paying a terrible price for some collective transgression.

The ambient depression affected Billie as it affected everyone. For one thing, she had not had a really good piece of candy in months. Sugar was (voluntarily) rationed, as was coal, gasoline, wheat, and other fundamentals that made life worth living. It was funny, but oddly disturbing, to see horses hitched to family automobiles for gas-saving outings. Life—as lived by Daddy Cassin and the troupers backstage in Lawton—was not supposed to be like this!

Billie sullenly did time at the laundry. (Joan wrote that she "learned to iron shirts and pleated skirts expertly.") What she resented most was Hal being in charge; and she did all in her power to prove that he was not. She grudgingly abided the work hours established by Anna. But when Hal told her to work, she was just as likely to walk out the door without explanation, and wouldn't be seen for hours.

Sometimes she rode or walked to Budd Park. On

one of those occasions, a late afternoon, she saw a blue-and-white party from St. Agnes gathered on the northern slope. They buzzed around a tall girl dressed all in white with a flowing veil. Billie edged closer, keeping herself hidden.

It was Mary Trenolone in a wedding dress. Girls who appreciated St. Agnes evidently felt attached to it for life. It was common for a graduate, usually a recent one, to return to St. Agnes on her wedding day to receive the blessings of the Mother and Sisters of the convent.

Billie could hear the oohs and aahs and giggles of the girls. Mary was a fantasy figure with her long tulle veil floating like smoke in the air.

"Jealous?" a boy asked Billie.

She had not seen him coming. She started, then recognized him. "I'm never getting married," she said matter-of-factly.

"It sure makes you popular," the boy said, nodding toward the happy group.

"Not for long," said Billie. Off in thought she said, half to herself, "She wanted to be a ballerina."

"Good girls don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Work."

Billie kicked him in the shin and chased him across the park. He slowed and let her tackle him. They wrestled until he laughed and her anger evaporated.

They were down in a grassy bowl between little hills. Suddenly a troop of boys whooped over a crest. They carried wooden guns; and their knickerbockers, shirts, and jackets were army brown. Like the "Indians" Billie ran with in Lawton, these boys were playing

at war—in this case, "trench warfare." They jumped over the two bodies lying together at the bottom of the depression and disappeared over the next rise.

"I have two pennies," said Billie. "We can get six pieces of licorice at Hill's—if they have any." She sprang to her feet. "Come on!" She sprinted across the green. When she reached the edge of the park, she looked back. He wasn't there; he wasn't following.

The boy that day might have been Eddie Smith who, like Ray Sterling, was someone she would meet again a few years later. Eddie, they say, was quite good looking though not very tall. He was older than Billie and her friends—a junior or senior at Northeast High—and his reputation for success with the opposite sex paralleled Billie's. His reputation made him popular; Billie's made her a pariah.

Hal Cassin also had a reputation for his success with the opposite sex. At fifteen, he was as tall as he would ever be, about five-ten, blond, unusually handsome, and as gregarious as Billie was introverted. He virtually had his pick of the girls at school—even those richer and better educated then he. Their mothers liked him; and their fathers almost trusted him. There was no Cassin family car, however, and in the long run, it seemed to Hal, he got passed over for wealthier boys with wheels.

Billie needed a sympathetic brother during those days of confusion, jealousy, resentment, sexual awakening, and feelings of inferiority. Hal wasn't the brother she needed. He considered her a childish nuisance fast growing into an eccentric slut; and his condescending attitude said that to her as clearly as words would have. But—as if deliberately to confuse Billie—

he was nice occasionally. Hal liked to visit Electric Park, called "The Coney Island of the Midwest," to ride the roller coaster and see the dancing girls on the midway. He sometimes allowed his little sister to go with him.

The park was situated along Brush Creek between Woodland and The Paseo, where a housing development now stands. Back then, the area was among the best residential districts, and the park's visitors were from Kansas City and cities throughout the region. Even in that war year, when anxieties were at their height, the park was bright and gay, glittering with music and light. Admission at the gate was ten cents, and each attraction—with the exception of band concerts and the like—cost extra. Not exorbitant and not cheap. That the Cassin children went there from time to time belies the contention that the laundry afforded them only a subsistence income.

It was nippy one sun-bright autumn day. Ladies in autumn frocks, some with matching lace-lined parasols, and gentlemen in light gray suits or wool sports clothing, strolled the fountained esplanade between the wooded picnic grounds and the bathing beach. Billie and Hal strolled as the others did, slowly, with dignity, frowning at the rowdy children who ran along the edges of the fashion parade. All eyes flickered for a moment to a young couple who pretended they were quite alone. He wore spring-white slacks and a flashy tight blue blazer; and her skirt was so high above her ankles it almost revealed her calves! Her white shoes were low-topped, and her silk stockings were in plain sight.

"I'm going to make a dress just like that!" Billie said excitedly to her brother.

But Hal was eyeing the dips, banks, and turns of the pride of the park, only a year old, The Big Dipper—the longest roller coaster in America. As he and Billie walked toward the broadside of it, its web of timbers rose higher into the sky.

Billie roamed the elegant park while Hal rode The Dipper, The Whip, the Monkey Speedway, The Steeple Chase, and a fun-house ride called A Thousand and One Troubles. She walked through the botanical gardens watching young men and women standing hand in hand, and stood on the beach listening to laughs and splashes. The happiness of others did not make her smile. A soldier with a chest full of decorations made her smile; then he joined his date who waited at the entrance to the Silhouette Gardens Playhouse, where "Schooley's Follies De Vogue" was "back by popular demand."

At night Electric Park earned its name. "It's glare," wrote a journalist when the park opened in 1907, "can be seen for miles around. It is acres of light, a white city!" The park was patterned after the 1904 World's Fair, and photos and engravings of it show a scene much like the finale of the movie *Meet Me In St. Louis.* It was futuristic, artistic, as magical as Disneyland.

That evening, Hal took Billie to one of the little pavilion theaters on the midway "to see Salome dance." Señor M.A. Lange's Military Band was blasting forth from the bandstand at the lagoon, treating Kansas City to George M. Cohan's new hit, "Over There." The brassy sound of it diminished and died as the children entered the Arabian Hall of Exotic Delights.

A blend of folk dances, belly dances, and classical ballet, the performance was sexually evocative only in

an amusing and polite way. Pretty girls covered neck to toe in tights and lavish costumes danced as courtesans from the Bible, as Spanish gypsies, and as Renaissance courtiers. One girl in particular appealed to Hal. She was petite, quick, and had an infectious smile that orientalized her eyes. She was a butterfly of colorful silk in her solo "Dance of the Seven Veils," which was performed to music by Saint-Saëns expertly rendered by a small orchestra. Hal had done a little research and learned that the girl was too old for him, but she was local. The past winter she had worked as a housemaid in a mansion on Ward Parkway and her name was Sally Rand. (Some years later, she would become America's première exotic dancer. Ironically, she would appear as the headliner at Loew's State Hollywood in 1925 while Billie, as Lucille LeSueur, would be dancing in a Charleston chorus there.)

As Billie and Hal left the theater and stepped into the park at nighttime, Billie said, "I can dance better than that. I want to go home."

"Then go."

(Joan later wrote: "Intimidated by the noise and action, I'd wander around while Hal watched Sally Rand show after show. I wanted and needed my brother at this point. I felt more orphaned than Annie.")

They returned to the laundry around midnight to find it empty. Mama was out again. (Joan wrote in 1928: "As soon as I'd get in the door she'd tell me to watch the laundry. Then she'd go out with somebody.") It was that Harry Hough who brought Anna home an hour or so later. To Billie, the man had not improved. For a while it had looked like he had been

displaced by others of Mama's suitors. But here he was again. Still sullen and sleepy-eyed, he glared at Billie as if he had nothing but contempt for her.

"Harry and I are going to be married," Anna announced. "He has invited us to come and live with him in his very fine house."

"I'm not going to live there," Hal said impersonally.

"Hal!" his mother exclaimed.

"I'll stay here with Hal," said Billie.

A long awkward silence was broken by Harry Hough's instruction to his bride-to-be: "Get this settled, Anna." And then he left.

As they prepared for bed, Anna explained that she was marrying the man because she was not capable of raising a family and running a business by herself.

"Don't marry him for my sake," said Hal. He started up the ladder to three small bedrooms they had recently improvised out of curtains and folding screens on an abandoned floor above.

Anna said that neither of the children had any choice in the matter.

But Hal had saved a little money. A few weeks later he informed his principal at Manual High that he was moving out of town. He gave as his forwarding address the farm owned by his grandparents in Arizona. Before the move to Mr. Hough's was to be made, he packed and left Kansas City.

Billie allowed her things to be boxed and stacked in the back of Harry Hough's City Gate delivery van; and she rode with them to her new home at 4407 Genessee Street—miles south of the laundry and even farther from Budd Park.

NINE

The move changed Billie's routine drastically: up at dawn, out with her mother and new stepfather ("Maybe she didn't really marry that bastard," Joan said. "I'll never know.") to the laundry agency on Ninth Street with, usually, a few pickup or delivery stops along the way. A full day, six days a week. At work either with customers in front or in the back room pressing and packaging, Billie found remarkably little to discuss with her mother. Laundry—that was the only comfortable topic.

Tired in the evenings, Billie sometimes walked through her new neighborhood or, once in a great while, when the weather was pleasant, she would take the number 47 streetcar to town, past the laundry stop, all the way to Budd Park.

But she saw her old buddies less frequently,

and the park held less and less interest for her. She dreamed of older boys in fancy cars calling for her in the evening (none ever did), and expensive party dresses, laughing and dancing. And seeing Daddy Cassin again.

There are suggestions of a sexual relationship between Billie and Harry Hough in a number of reports. In her autobiography, Joan wrote: "She [Mother] felt sure life would pick up for us when she married Mr. Hough. I never did tell her that I ran away finally because the one thing Mr. Hough tried to pick up was *me*." She told Roy Newquist: "That guy didn't want me around." And in a 1929 interview: "I found out later that Mr. Hough was the reason I was placed in a boarding school." It may be that Billie turned the tables on Hough and teased him until he was frightened; or that she threatened to tell her mother; or that she taunted him to insult him. And though her explanations of Hough's motives may have varied, her attitude toward him remained true: she consistently expressed her dislike of the man and was only too happy to live somewhere other than under his roof.

There was a boarding school on Harry Hough's delivery route—Rockingham Academy, at Fourty-fourth and Campbell. He learned in passing that a "helper" was needed there. Yes, they told him, his daughter could live there in exchange for work; she could receive a high-school education as a bonus if she applied herself.

The school was a rock and wood-framed three-story house. Anna and Billie were doubtless ignorant of the fact that this was the school's fifth address in

seven years. It was run—and had been at its previous addresses—by Effie H. Stuttle, headmistress, chief educator, and principal. She lived in a suite of rooms on the first floor with her husband Gilbert, who taught mathematics, physical culture, and bookkeeping.

Mrs. Stuttle herself greeted Anna and Billie at the front door. The headmistress was a large woman with a sagging face; her apparel was dark and heavy.

The office was more like an old-fashioned sitting room. The desk was tiny, and the electric floor lamp seemed an anachronism. Billie smiled to herself: no pictures of saints, and compared to St. Agnes, this place was positively lively. There were clopping footfalls upstairs and shouts coming from somewhere—male shouts. Then there was a sound like a gunshot. The running stopped. Maybe the sound had been just a board hitting the floor.

"We will work your little girl very hard," Mrs. Stuttle said to Mrs. Cassin frankly, "and if she responds cooperatively, she will profit. Her room is under the stairs on the third floor."

On their way upstairs a pang of conscience struck Anna. "Billie, I . . ."

"It'll be fine, Mother." Billie smiled. In a single move she was escaping her "stepfather," her unsympathetic mother, and that god-awful laundry. Anything was bound to be an improvement. Besides, a hint of the importance of education was occurring to Billie. High-society people all knew how to talk properly, and what to talk about.

A ship's bell clanged, and a score or more of teenagers appeared from nowhere, ran up and down stairs,

and scurried into second-floor classrooms. A child upstairs started to cry.

Anna and Billie continued to the third floor and easily found the door to a little wedge-shaped room under the stairs to the attic.

"I'll have Harry bring your things later today," Anna said. Anna ran a finger along a waist-high molding on the papered wall; she looked at her brown fingertip and said, "I see where your cleaning ought to start." Her eyes strayed to a row of papers tacked to the wall. They were schedules and calendars evidently placed there by Billie's predecessor—who had left some time ago, from the look of the room.

"I'll manage," Billie said.

She did manage. She may have been almost happy for the first month or two. The room was hers alone, the other children scarcely noticed her, and the work was unsupervised as long as she adhered to Mrs. Stuttle's tight schedules. Billie seldom attended classes, though she assumed that one day she would have more time and more motivation to do so; when she did attend, she stood at the back pretending to be invisible. And the work—as Joan never tired of telling interviewers—was satisfying. She said, "I worked and studied, and I showed diligence and application."

She also *observed,* and learned things that disturbed her. Joan once told an interviewer: "The school was little more than a detention home where most of the girls were 'wayward' or the daughters of parents whose homes had been broken up by divorce." Boys were in the minority at Rockingham, but their stories were sim-

ilar. Several of them had been expelled from public schools.

Rockingham itself was a bit delinquent. Often, when the front chime sounded, it was bill collectors at the door.

More than one biographer has suggested that Mrs. Stuttle [she has not been mentioned in print by name before] was especially malicious toward Billie. "She was jealous because Billie was pretty," one suggested. It seems more likely that the headmistress was a woman of stern principle and unbending authority who had a bad temper and was naturally suspicious of hired help. From other evidence she was also anxious for Rockingham to appeal to the country-club set. Billie was probably not being singled out for torture.

It must have seemed that way, though, when the more interest in schoolwork Billie showed, the more duties were heaped upon here. If Billie slaved to find time for penmanship class, Mrs. Stuttle would assign her to the kitchen for that very hour to prepare lunch for the kindergarten boarders on the third floor. When schoolwork caused Billie's housecleaning to fall behind schedule, Mrs. Stuttle advised her to catch up on the weekend instead of returning home as she usually did. Months went by without a visit to Mother and Mr. Hough—which probably was no real hardship for Billie.

Before long, one of the boys began circling Billie as a cat does its prey before deciding to pounce. Mrs. Stuttle caught Billie smiling at him and threatened to fire her. Billie went into another of her blind rages. She threw down her apron and stormed out the chiming front door.

According to biographer Moffitt in 1932: "She walked through a park until a late hour, when a policeman saw her and sent her back to school. 'I took off my shoes and tried to sneak in,' she says, 'but she heard me! She dragged me to the kichen, threw me on the floor and kicked me and kicked me.'"

Furious and frightened as Billie was, she could not bring herself to beg to be allowed to return home to Anna and Harry.

After that incident, wrote Joan, "hardly a day went by when the headmistress did not beat me. This woman deserves every bad word I could write about her."

In 1931 a Boston reporter picked up the narrative in his column: "Then Billie plunged into the most forlorn and wretched days of her entire life. She was given a bed in a dusty attic; she had to rise at six in the morning, she staggered to bed at eleven. She scrubbed floors, she washed windows, she helped to get dinner.

"The principal always carried a stout cane with her. Whenever she saw Billie she would stop and give her a few sharp blows with the stick across the arms and shoulders."

Billie tolerated the punishment as the lesser of two evils. "All the time I was at Rockingham, four years," Joan wrote, "when I'd come home we seemed to be speaking to each other from a distance, through glass partitions. I didn't know what they [Mother and Hal] were thinking about."

She ran away from Rockingham once more, several months after her first attempted escape. It was late in the afternoon, but some of the older students were still there. Billie had finally succeeded in attracting no-

tice of a dubious kind: everyone felt sorry for her. She was the poor ragged waif out of a Dickens novel who was never allowed to get up off her knees. She had started scrubbing the stairs to the basement and had left her dust pan on the top step but didn't have quite enough energy to climb back to get it. She sat midway down staring up at it.

"Can I help, Billie?" asked a girl who was passing the door.

"I forgot to bring down the dust pan," she said wearily.

"I'll toss it to you," the girl offered. She stooped to pick it up.

Mrs. Stuttle loomed behind the girl, and her large dark shape dimmed the light from the upstairs hall. She took the dust pan and threw it at Billie. It clattered to the bricks of the basement floor. Then Mrs. Stuttle lumbered down the steps to where Billie cowered and grabbed her by the hair. "Close the door!" the principal ordered. The horrified girl at the top hurriedly complied.

Billie was dragged by the hair to the floor, where the woman bellowed at her, "I'll teach you to work if I have to kill you!" (Joan repeated that line of dialogue consistently, in numerous places and on numerous occasions.) Down came the cane again and again ("Until I was dazed," Joan wrote), and then she gasped as she felt the hard point of a high-laced boot.

Billie sobbed until she could not catch her breath, and her convulsing chest embarrassed her hours later when the tears had stopped. She wandered out again into the night.

It was about two miles from Rockingham to Mr. Hough's house on Genessee. Running through the cold March air, Billie felt better by the time she neared it. She almost looked forward to seeing her mother. Billie had talked herself into being brave enough to tell all about her mistreatment at the school; and now she had bruises to prove it. There had to be some answer to life's problems that would be less painful than Rockingham!

Billie saw lights on in the parlor. She knocked at the door.

Mr. Hough called through it: "Who's there?"

"Billie."

After a delay his voice came back. "Go away."

"I gotta see Mother!"

"She doesn't live here anymore."

Billie was not sure she heard right.

A lock bolt was pulled and made a *clunk.* The door opened slowly. Mr. Hough stood there in his underwear; the air behind him was hazy with cigar smoke.

Billie turned and ran.

"I had no money for carfare, and I walked hours before locating my mother, who had moved," Joan later told an interviewer.

In all probability, she found her mother that night back at the laundry; that was their address for another year or so.

Hal had come back. Perhaps Anna had asked him to return knowing she planned to leave Mr. Hough. He had been gone less than a year but he looked a lot older. His hair was on the longish side and almost

white from sun-bleaching. "Coming back to work?" he asked Billie unenthusiastically when he saw her.

"No," she said. She wanted to return to Rockingham. She certainly did not belong with these two.

(The various reports of Billie's stay at Rockingham leave a reader with the impression that she was beaten constantly, year after year, and yet preferred Rockingham to alternatives like living and working at the laundry. It is more likely that though mistreated occasionally and always sternly disciplined, Billie was generally treated squarely and was contented there.)

Thinking back, something new had been added to her Rockingham routine, something she valued. A little thing, really, something she had not realized mattered so much. She had been placed in charge of the small children.

"The kiddies were my only comfort," Joan wrote in 1928. "After I got them to bed I would read them stories and wonder why their mothers left them in a school like this when they had money enough to keep them at home and take care of them."

The kiddies were worth going back for. They were practically orphans—neglected but not technically abandoned by their parents. A grade-school teacher came to instruct them every morning; thereafter, Billie was their overseer.

But Billie was only fourteen, almost a child herself. Mrs. Stuttle allowed her to make no decisions of her own. A strict schedule was provided, and Billie was required to follow it to the letter. It applied to all the children (probably about a dozen of them most of the time), and it provided for their punishment if they re-

belled. "Discipline frees the mind for concentration and growth," Mrs. Stuttle was fond of saying, "and it begins in the cradle."

Billie had one other reason for returning to Rockingham. One of the boys there had promised to take her to a dance.

Shortly after the movie *Mommie Dearest* opened in Kansas City, four close friends there congregated for a weekly game of bridge.

The woman in the north position at the card table was the youngest, having just turned sixty. Her friends seated at east, west, and south were older, in their seventies and eighties. North was also the hostess this evening and, coincidentally, the "dummy" when the subject of the movie came up. She related the following conversation:

"Joan Crawford couldn't really have been like that," said East, leading a spade. "*Nobody* could be like that."

South slipped a spade from North's hand. "A woman just could not treat her children that way. Does the book paint her that black?"

West followed suit. "I haven't read it. But you know, that woman had such a terrible reputation here that for the longest time people wouldn't see her movies. She was a star everywhere but in her hometown. I remember when *Our Dancing Daughters* came out in the late twenties. Nobody would go."

"Why?" East asked, taking the trick. "You'd think they'd go out of curiosity." She led another spade.

"People here had the attitude," said West, the el-

dest, "that someone that loose and wicked did not deserve success."

"I read *Mommie Dearest,*" said East skeptically. "It was more detailed than the movie, but still . . ."

"You'd better believe it was accurate," said North, who had been listening as she set out a tray of sandwiches. She lit a long slender cigarette.

"What makes you think so?" West asked, playing a trump.

"I was there," said North. She was a small energetic woman with pure white hair. She knew she had their interest; she slipped into her chair though her partner was playing out her hand.

"Where? When?" asked her longtime friends.

"I worked for Joan Crawford in California. I was hired to be her children's nurse. And I can tell you . . . *Mommie Dearest* didn't go far enough."

All points of the compass talked at once; a question cut through the chatter: "How long were you there?"

"About a year, in the early forties. Christina must have been five or six, and the boy—they called him Phillip, Jr., then—was around two."

"You're putting us on," West challenged with a chuckle. "Why haven't you talked about this before?"

"I have . . . oocasionally. I've mentioned that I worked for Joan Crawford before I went into the Navy as a nurse, and the subject was usually dropped there. For one thing, I was never, you know, starstruck. The biggest thrill I remember was meeting Gracie Allen and George Burns; they came for dinner once."

"Did you live there . . . at Crawford's house?"

"I had my own room. It was a big house. There's one thing I've never forgotten. In the dining room there was more sterling than you'd find in a store. Much of it was engraved to Joan and Doug—Fairbanks, that is. It was exquisitely beautiful, and I've always wondered what happened to it all."

While the bridge hand was being played out, North—Mrs. Natalie (Wengrover) Frost—talked about her year with Crawford.

"Most of the incidents of the book take place after I left, when Christina Crawford was older. But I can tell you, Christina's book is fully consistent with everything I do know. I kept all this to myself for years. Who'd have believed me? I didn't even tell my sons about those times until recently.

"For instance, Tina—that's what we called Christina—hated artichokes. Joan used to serve them boiled with a sauce to dip the leaves in. And she forced Tina to eat every last leaf. At least once—it's awful even to say this—Tina threw up, and her mommie dearest made her eat the vomit. That's hard for even me to believe—and I was there!

"Why didn't I report it to the authorities? I was afraid no one would believe me. This was at a time when Joan Crawford was very popular. She wasn't employed making a picture the whole time I was there, but she was still a beloved star. I was just twenty years old, too, right out of nursing school, not very experienced.

"All that about strapping Christopher to the bed is quite true. She renamed the boy Christopher after she left Phillip Terry. She instructed me how to tie him

down and insisted upon it. I think I have a memo from her about that; I kept some things. I'll look next time I'm dummy. She even insisted Christopher be tied to a chair while his room was being cleaned. The poor thing was only about two years old.

"There was a schedule she gave me when I first went to work there, and it never varied. I'd take the children out to play on a schedule as tight as the Army's.

"One day I was out with Tina. We hadn't been out long. She said to me, 'Let's play that you're my mommie and I'll be your little girl.' I said that sounded fine.

"Joan—she had phenomenal hearing—yelled from the upstairs window for Christina to come in. Tina came out a few minutes later, her eyes red, and said we couldn't play that anymore. '*She's* my mommie,' Tina explained, 'not anybody else.'

"One day the cook made hot cereal, and there were bugs in it. 'She can't eat this!' I said when I saw it. But Joan made her. 'The bugs won't hurt her,' Joan said to me, 'they're cooked.' Maybe so, but that's hardly the point, is it?

"I met Joan's mother, Anna, only once. She came to the screen door at the back of the house when I was in the kitchen. She told me who she was, so of course I invited her in. Christina was frightened to death! It was very clear that Joan's mother was not welcome in the house. Anna said she could stay only a minute. She talked to Tina and then left. Anna was a plain little woman who seemed nice enough. She was frightened, too; she knew she wasn't welcome. Joan's brother Hal lived in California then, too, but I never saw him.

"Phillip Terry, Joan's husband, was a pleasant man, younger than Joan. He was affectionate with the children; he tried to be anyway; but he had to go along with what Joan wanted for them.

"I had a few run-ins with her. She had a white bathroom floor. Not tiles—like one big solid tile. It showed scuff marks. Once when I'd been in there, I evidently left a little mark. I couldn't even see it when Joan tried to point it out. She insisted I clean it up and be more careful. She was truly fanatical about cleanliness.

"But it wasn't that I didn't like her. She never harmed me, and she could be gracious and generous. I just couldn't like her for the way she treated those children.

"I said to her once that I had heard she was from Kansas City. I said I was too. I got a very cold reply, and we never mentioned it again. She did not have pleasant memories, obviously."

"It was mutual," said West, who remembered Crawford's reputation from the 1920s.

While the next hand was being shuffled and dealt in a leisurely fashion, Natalie Frost rummaged through some cartons in storage. She emerged with an envelope containing pictures of Crawford and Phillip Terry autographed to her, memos in Joan's handwriting, and a schedule typed on letterhead stationery.

One of the memos addressed to Nana (Natalie) said:

Nana,

When you take Christina to the school car, be sure

to tell Mrs. Singleton that I have pinned her bond money in her slack pocket.

Tell Christina not to try to unpin it as she might tear the check. Let her teacher or the stamp money collector unpin it.

Thank you,

Mrs. Terry.

There was another that said:

Nana,

Christina is going to school in the morning. We put Phillip on the potty at eleven as Miss Bodwen said his bed was wet this morning. I changed his bed at 9:45. If you will look to see how it's tied down and always do it that way, his feet cannot kick off the covers.

Thank you,

Mrs. Terry.

Natalie found a copy of the schedule she came to know by heart in short order. Given to her when she first entered Crawford's employ, it never varied. It said:

Nurse's Schedule

6:45—wake Christina up, put her on potty; brush her teeth and face and hands and start her to dress; while she dresses herself, dress baby.

7:00—downstairs.

Feed baby while Christina feeds herself.

7:30—Christina must be on potty to do duty before going to school. Car calls for her at . . .

7:45—and she should be downstairs when the car comes by.

Nurse should then have her breakfast; take

Phillip upstairs and put on potty; make beds while he is doing his duty, then tie him in his play chair while room is being cleaned and bathroom floor mopped.

Get Phillip ready to go outside.

10:00—orange juice and drops for Phillip.
Outside to play until . . .

11:45—lunch—then put baby on potty and down for nap in darkened room at . . .

12:15

2:45—wake baby, put on potty, dress him to go outside; give him 4 ounces of warm milk before taking out.

4:00—meet Christina at gate when she returns from school. Keep her outside until . . .

4:45—when you give her a tub bath; baby a cocoa butter rub.

Have both children downstairs for supper at . . .

5:30—put both children on potty and have both in bed at . . .

6:30

"She didn't have much sense of humor did she?" East remarked.

"No," said North, seated to begin bidding for the next hand, "she wasn't a witty woman."

The bridge game was at a standstill.

"What was she preparing those kids for, the Marines?" West wondered.

"What would she do if you got off schedule?" asked South.

"I made sure I never did."

"She couldn't have loved them," West speculated. "How could she have loved anybody?"

"I've wondered that," said Mrs. Frost. "But I believe she really believed her method was unquestionably right—that that was the way to raise children, the only way."

"Where in the world could she have gotten ideas like that?" South asked, incredulous.

"I can't imagine," said their hostess.

TEN

America won its war in November of 1918, and only a month or so afterward, the WCTU almost won its battle against alcohol; Congress approved the Prohibition amendment; a number of states and municipalities had already outlawed booze.

Prohibiting alcohol eliminated a vast industry that might have otherwise employed returning soldiers. It also threatened to snatch a good stiff drink from the hands of the war-weary men just when they needed one most.

Evangelists in increasing numbers claimed victory over the devils possessing the rest of the country. Tent revivalists capitalized on what appeared to be the country's reversion to Bible-thumping intolerance. The Ku Klux Klan rose phoenixlike and by 1924 would boast four million new members.

As a result, a philosophical rebellion coalesced in

which anarchists, Communists, bums, sophisticates, dandies, and thoughtful moderns attached themselves to each other and watched to see who would laugh at the "moralists." Although the real clash was over opposing ethics and values, the most obvious manifestation of the rebellion was in popular music. A "wanton" strain of lively sound reverberated out of New Orleans, New York, Chicago, and Kansas City. People called it jazz (and spelled it *jass* for a while). In the same way that the music of Elvis Presley and The Beatles buried, in the fifties and sixties, pablum such as "How Much Is that Doggie in the Window" (and some good music as well, in the faddish process), the fast and giddy songs and dances of Tin Pan Alley quickly subdued the dignified, sanctimonious, charming, benevolent, and bigoted Chautauqua music of the 1910s. In the serious arts, a French movement, Dada, exalted absurdity (one famous artist sent an ordinary porcelain urinal to a great museum and called it art; they displayed it); *beauty* came to be considered childish. And that new thing called radio promised to whisk fads and fashions from coast to coast at the speed of whimsy.

Crime statistics started creeping up in the postwar recession, and political corruption became noticeable. But speculations were beginning to pay off, and a resurgance of Horatio Algerism cut across all battle lines in the ethical skirmish. Panic. Perseverance. Prosperity.

As if it knew it would be recorded as something unique, the Roaring Twenties began right on schedule in January of 1920. The decade—fully loaded like a miles-long freight—began to chug up from a crawl to the full steam that would send it plummeting with the 1929 market crash that "couldn't happen."

In January of 1920 placard-carrying Prohibitionists saw to it that the police enforced the law and padlocked every saloon in Kansas City. Among the saloons that died that day in January were those owned and operated by "Boss" Tom Pendergast, who also owned and ran the city's largest liquor warehouse. Pendergast also controlled most of the city's politicians, and his power increased with every election. When he saw the writing on the wall, he maneuvered the city council into buying his costliest piece of property, the Jefferson Hotel with its popular "jass" cabaret, for the widening of Sixth Street—an improvement he had proposed in the first place. The city paid him $79,550 for the hotel, condemned it, and shut it down on January 16.

Tom Pendergast was so redoubtable a presence that people called Kansas City "Tom's Town," and his modest office at 1908 Main, "The Capitol of Missouri," while the real capitol in Jefferson City was called "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Pendergast's political machine formed a Prohibition friendship with the underworld. Corruption escalated throughout the decade, and the city's bootleggers had little to fear save an occasional rap on the knuckles. (The odd alliance fared so well that in the early thirties, Pendergast took a sensitive kidnapping case away from the lackluster K.C. cops and turned it over to the mob—assuming they would handle it more efficiently. They did. They returned the victim unharmed and turned the surviving perpetrators over to the law.)

In the twenties, Kansas City was ranked first in the nation in meat packing, farm implement distribution, yellow pine lumber, and dozens of farm products; was

second in soap production, and third in automobile distribution. It was a rich city that was consequently rated number one in the nation in beautiful residential districts. Out of those districts sprang a lofty party-going society.

That was the world outside the halls of Rockingham Academy; and Billie, age fifteen, began to discover it in the spring of 1920.

There was this boy, "The wealthiest boy in school," wrote Joan. Let's say he was called "Tommy" (no name for him could be found).

Tommy was a renegade and a nonconformist. He saw, or pretended to see, nothing peculiar in his choice of a date for a dance. Having all the pretty rich young things in his classes to choose from, he picked the house maid, Rockingham's Cinderella.

Billie was all smiles and tears when she suggested timidly that perhaps her Prince Charming should ask Mrs. Stuttle for permission.

Tommy knocked at the principal's door and entered.

A moment later, Tommy and Mrs. Suttle approached Billie. She cowered in a corner by the stairs; her eyes were on the headmistress's walking cane.

The towering woman said to little Billie with a nod, "Providing you find something suitable to wear—you may go."

Billie was amazed and terribly excited.

A great deal has been made of Billie's "first date" in articles and books. All of it has been drawn from inconsistent accounts in interviews with Crawford. Her first date was "with Ray Sterling," or "with one of the young gentlemen at Rockingham," or with "the richest

boy in school" who "took me to a neighborhood dance at a college ballroom," or at "a high school gymnasium." She wore a "faded blue chiffon dress," all the reports agree, which "came a few hours later [after Billie called her mother with the good news] from her mother, who salvaged the dress from discarded clothes at the laundry," or who "bought it at a cut-rate clothing store," or who "spent all her meager savings on it," or, as John Moffitt wrote in 1932:

"The news ran through the school and there was general rejoicing. The girls were at the age that knows no barriers. One of them offered Billie a dress, a cast-off garment of faded blue chiffon that had a jagged tear under one arm. The tear was soon mended and the dress became a realized dream of finery to the girl whose wardrobe consisted of two blue skirts and a sweater."

The "neighborhood dance" was probably the annual affair put on by the Hyde Park Association; in 1920, it was held at the Westport High School gymnasium. The decorations were in premature spring colors—green, yellow, white, and lavender; the hues were splashed around the drab gym on streamers and huge tissue-paper flowers. The brass and percussion of a ten-piece band set the joint to jumping, and there were half a dozen stations of refreshments—fruit punch and mounds of home-baked cookies. Billie was transported.

Joan told *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1942: "I can still bring back every sensation I felt at my first dance. There was a raucous college band, but to me it was the music of the spheres. I danced with one boy after another and found that I kept step to the rhythm without quite knowing how I did it. The girls paid no attention

to me, but I was used to that. I was dancing, which was the only thing that mattered. I felt excited and alive for the first time since I had left Lawton."

In another interview, Joan was quoted as saying, "I wandered with my youthful sweetheart through a beautiful yard in which we came upon a gardenia tree. The fragrance of the blossoms combined with the beauty of the occasion and the happiness of love to give me a heart-stilling thrill."

She told one of her earliest interviewers: "I feel lonely and lost unless the odor of gardenias is constantly around me."

Billie returned from her first dance not only starry-eyed but thoughtful with a glimmering of purpose. She wanted to belong among those wealthy, confident, and fun-loving young people, and she thought she knew how she might accomplish it. Mrs. Stuttle had made a discovery too. "She was impressed, I know," said Crawford, "because I had been noticed by a boy with money." In another interview Crawford said, "That woman used to let me go out and dance with them so they'd keep coming to the school! It was then that it began to dawn on me that men might be useful to a woman."

Her relationship with her mother improved a bit with distance. Joan wrote about a weekend spent with her mother in which the two enjoyed seeing Mary Pickford in *Little Lord Fauntleroy* at the "flickers" and had supper at an inexpensive restaurant. Anna was pleased by the new humility and femininity Billie had acquired; and she bought her a $4.95 party dress as a birthday surprise.

Billie believed she had completely outgrown Hal—

who, though a bit older, now seemed childish and beneath contempt. In Billie's mind he was without purpose or goals. The roller coaster he was addicted to at Electric Park suited him precisely. Up and down and up and down and back in line for another go-round.

In 1921 Anna and Hal moved to a spacious apartment at the corner of Wyandotte and Armour Boulevard, in a fine residential district. One of the men in Anna's life had assisted with the move and then had drifted on. The address was within a brisk walking distance of Rockingham; and Billie began spending weekends at home.

On a warm breezy day, a Friday after school, Billie sensed that she was being followed. She turned and smiled at a handsome boy some distance behind her. He smiled back.

The next Friday he spoke to her. He asked if he could carry her books.

She nodded and smiled. She handed him her things.

"What's your sorority?" he asked.

Billie shook her head.

"Don't you go to Westport High?"

She shook her head again.

"I thought not. I'd have remembered seeing you."

Billie smiled. Her eyes appraised the boy; he was dressed neatly, fashionably, but he probably had no fortune behind him.

He told her his name. It was Jim Miller. And she told him hers.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

She told him.

"I live next door, at 3428 Wyandotte."

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She smiled.

"I live with my sister and my mother."

They walked together and spoke very little. Apparently as shy as she, he did not ask her for a date. But he appeared again a few weeks later, as she walked home along Gillham Road, and offered to carry her books.

Jim Miller "fell under her spell," as he puts it today, and became an admirer from afar. He remained aware of her activities for several years and was friendly enough with her to be welcomed to a sound stage in Hollywood years later when she was a star. Miller lives in Portland, Oregon, now, and is a retired lieutenant colonel who served with MacArthur. (He almost met another of Kansas City's famous females. "Leon Daniels, who lived on Armour Boulevard between Wyandotte and Central, kept wanting me to meet his girl friend by the name of Jean Harlow, who lived in Knickerbocker Place off Thirty-sixth. But I knew so many girls I said I was not interested, I'm sorry to say.")

Miller remembers hearing that Anna Cassin was a widow. "While I never saw Billie's mother, I constantly observed the number of large expensive cars lined up at her apartment—men either having or trying to have a date with her. With Billie there too, it was like Grand Central Station all the time. Billie rode in more Stutz Bearcats, McFarlands, Packards, Pierce Arrows, Dusenbergs, Cords, Moons, and Willys Knight cars than most other Kansas Citians."

Jim recalls that in the years he knew Billie she never looked "poor." She dressed nicely, in the latest fashion, and commanded attention wherever she went.

He saw her at dances at the Kansas City Country Club, at high school and college proms, and in the night spots of the city.

In Lawton, Billie had been a conspicuous misfit, a wanderer, a fantastical ragamuffin. To the junior country-club set of Kansas City she became an enigmatic femme fatale. She seldom spoke. She never talked about herself. Few knew she was a domestic at a private school. If she was Cinderella, she had found a way to break the midnight jinx. All eyes strayed to her, and she loved it.

Once, at a dance at Kansas City Country Club (now K.C.'s Loose Park), she saw a boy who looked familiar. He looked at her with some curiosity, but she did not see in his eyes the automatic admiration she had learned to detect. She saw disdain—as if he knew her well and was ashamed of her for the way she behaved. He was not really handsome. His face was too oval, his hair too plastered down, his lips too thin. But he was imposing—tall and beefy with close-set brown eyes. She had met him somewhere before. She hadn't liked him then, either.

"Who is that?" Billie asked her date.

"Ray Sterling. He goes to Northeast. A religious nut. Don't pay any attention to him."

"A prig," another boy agreed.

Billie whirled away with the first boy to take her hand and put Ray Sterling out of her mind—until later that evening.

A bright moon coasted over rolling greens beyond the terrace of the clubhouse. Billie saw a boy alone out there—Ray Sterling. She had not seen him on the dance floor. She walked off the terrace so he would

have to look at her. The orchestra could still be heard on the lawn—distant, like a phonograph cylinder.

She took a few steps in his direction. "Don't you like to dance, Ray?"

"Not particularly," he said convincingly; and Billie realized she had been wrong to be feeling sorry for him.

"I love to dance," Billie said defensively. "What's wrong with that?" She took his arm and directed him toward a rose arbor that looked like Stonehenge in the moonlight. He allowed her to touch and lead him but made no move in response.

"I wish I had come with you tonight," she said.

He had to have heard her, but he made no comment.

"I'd better get back," she said cheerfully, masking her disappointment.

"Good night," he said pleasantly. But he had not smiled at her once.

"Before that night," Joan said in an interview that touched on her first love, "I had never once thought of doing anything but dance at a dancing party. Wasn't that what parties were for? It had never occurred to me to sit out a dance and just talk. The first boy I ever sat out with was Ray."

Jim Miller might have been at the Country Club that night. He was certainly at a dance at the Plantation Grill shortly thereafter, when—after he had danced with Billie—he observed that she had made dates with two boys for that same evening.

"It's my fault," she told them sweetly, "but don't worry, I'll dance with both of you!"

The matter was probably academic. Billie danced

with so many boys she had little time for either of her dates.

"She was," Miller said, "a ballroom dancer to put all others to shame. She possessed a presence and personality that took one's breath away; it was electrical. When she came into a ballroom or gathering, she, without visibly trying, caught everyone's eye. All men were drawn to her and she knew how to turn on the charm by looking at you with those naturally very wide-open eyes and making you feel that you were the most important person in the whole world. She was always pleasant but not gushing. While she seemed to have complete control of herself, she gave the impression she was raising hell by the simple device of having a smile on her face at all times—a smile more like a permanent grin. The grin implied to her escort that they could really cut the rug a bit, and they did. Young men would practically line up to make dates with her."

(Jim Miller became an exhibition dancer himself, and still enjoys ballroom dancing. In 1927 he and Miss Virginia Aikins danced on the stage of the Shubert Theater in Kansas City in an edition of the Junior League Follies.)

Jim continued to walk Billie home from school from time to time. "We talked about dancing," he said, "and about people we knew in common." But he was not one of those standing in line to ask her out. "Not owning a car, I did not seek nor have an opportunity to have a date with her. But I had ample opportunities to observe her activities."

He observed her transformation into what he

called "a perimeter society woman." Secretly "poor as a churchmouse," she managed to be seen with the wealthiest and most popular boys. "She used them as stepping stones," Miller said, "to achieve really amazing popularity." And her education had essentially stopped with the sixth grade.

ELEVEN

December 21, 1921. Billie convinced an unenthusiastic escort to take her to see a play at Northeast High School.

"What for?" asked Eddie Gettel.

"I think it'd be fun," Billie insisted.

The play was *The Servant in the House* and it starred several young men Billie had gotten to know—Edward Donohue and his brother Roy, Rufus Austin, Ward Foster, and Ray Sterling in the role of "the gentleman of leisure."

The simple setting for the light comedy was colorless and laughably amateurish compared to the professional stagecraft exhibited at the Lawton theaters; and Billie laughed when the curtain rose on it. The acting was stilted, and the young lady who sang a song had a wobbly voice. But mainly Billie laughed at Ray. He wasn't actually bad, but the character was so unlike

Ray—suave, swaggering, a man who laughed easily and sprawled like a tired spider when he sat. It was a studied, measured performance with no warmth underneath.

Dragging Eddie by the hand she pushed her way backstage after the show. She found Ray still on the set talking to friends; she sidled through their ranks to confront him.

"You were so funny, Ray," she said, grinning. "And look at you with all that makeup!"

He frowned. "I'm glad you enjoyed the show, Billie," he said.

"Pity you can't be a 'gentleman of leisure' yourself, Ray. Do you know Eddie Gettel?"

"We've met," said Ray with a cold nod to Eddie.

Other conversation had stopped. Eyes were on Billie and Ray and Eddie. Eddie noticed; he drifted away from the implicit spotlight.

"I wish you'd called me, Ray. I had to find out by accident that you were performing," said Billie.

He said quietly, "I have *never* called you. We don't have that sort of friendship."

Tears rushed to Billie's eyes, but her smile never faltered. She tugged Eddie toward the exit.

Eddie Gettel's family owned a large, exclusive and successful men's clothing store in downtown Kansas City. He was one of her escorts for several years. It may have been Eddie who was with Billie at the Jack O'Lantern Club the next time Billie ran into Ray Sterling.

The Jack O'Lantern grew up with Billie and the changing times. From 1905 it had been Morton's Confections, which served the best ice cream in town and

held recitals of chamber music in its oval dining room. In 1920 its new owners retained the great gas lanterns flanking the entrance, named it the Jack O'Lantern, and transformed it into an opulent dance hall. It instantly became home base for the Pan Hellenes, a coalition of high school fraternities and sororities, and their counterparts at the universities and conservatories of the area. It continued to serve Morton's famous ice cream and established a reputation for gourmet sandwiches (obtainable outside by curb service), imaginative beverages (non-alcoholic, but ideal for mixers), and nonstop music.

The hall was oval with a 24-foot-high domed ceiling in which were hung three 15-branched chandeliers. Finely chiseled bas-relief pillars supported the dome, and the colors were gold, white, and old ivory. The floor was heavy hardwood, perfect for dancing, and the acoustics were outstanding.

The Charleston had not been invented yet, but the Black Bottom, the Fox Trot, and a dozen varieties of Cakewalk were plenty frantic. Clarinetist Ray Hatfield, who played in bands at the Jack O'Lantern, opines that today's dance trends have nothing on the fads of the twenties. "They've added a few mechanical blasts, some funny colored flashing lights, and presume that *they've* discovered 'the beat,'" he said. He remembers one method of getting dates in those days: "There was a popular tune titled 'Would You?' and we'd play it during every set. Then our eyes would roam the dance floor and eventually catch those of a young lady. A wink or a nod would assure a late date after the dance."

Charles Rogers and four talented friends from

Olathe (Kansas) High School formed a terrific combo that often played at "the Jack." Jim Miller remembered that the Rogers band was there in 1922. Miller, and a good many other Americans, followed Rogers' career with interest. "He was a young man with curly hair and a Greek-god appearance," said Miller. A few years later, the musician would be known as "Buddy" Rogers. After working his way through the University of Kansas playing in bands—he could play twelve instruments but usually featured himself on trombone or drums—he made his way to Hollywood, became a big success with his starring role in *Wings,* and in the mid-thirties married Mary Pickford—Joan Crawford's former mother-in-law.

Ray Sterling was at the Jack one night. His date was Julia McInerny, who served with Ray as an officer of the Northeast High Shakespeare Club. Julia was conservative in the extreme. Her frock revealed nothing below the neck, she wore no makeup, and her hair was in a bun. She looked like an apprentice librarian. But there was kindness in her face and delight in her eyes as she surveyed the posh and happy surroundings.

Billie, wearing a short filmy dress and an abundance of makeup, smiled at Ray and seemed amused by Julia.

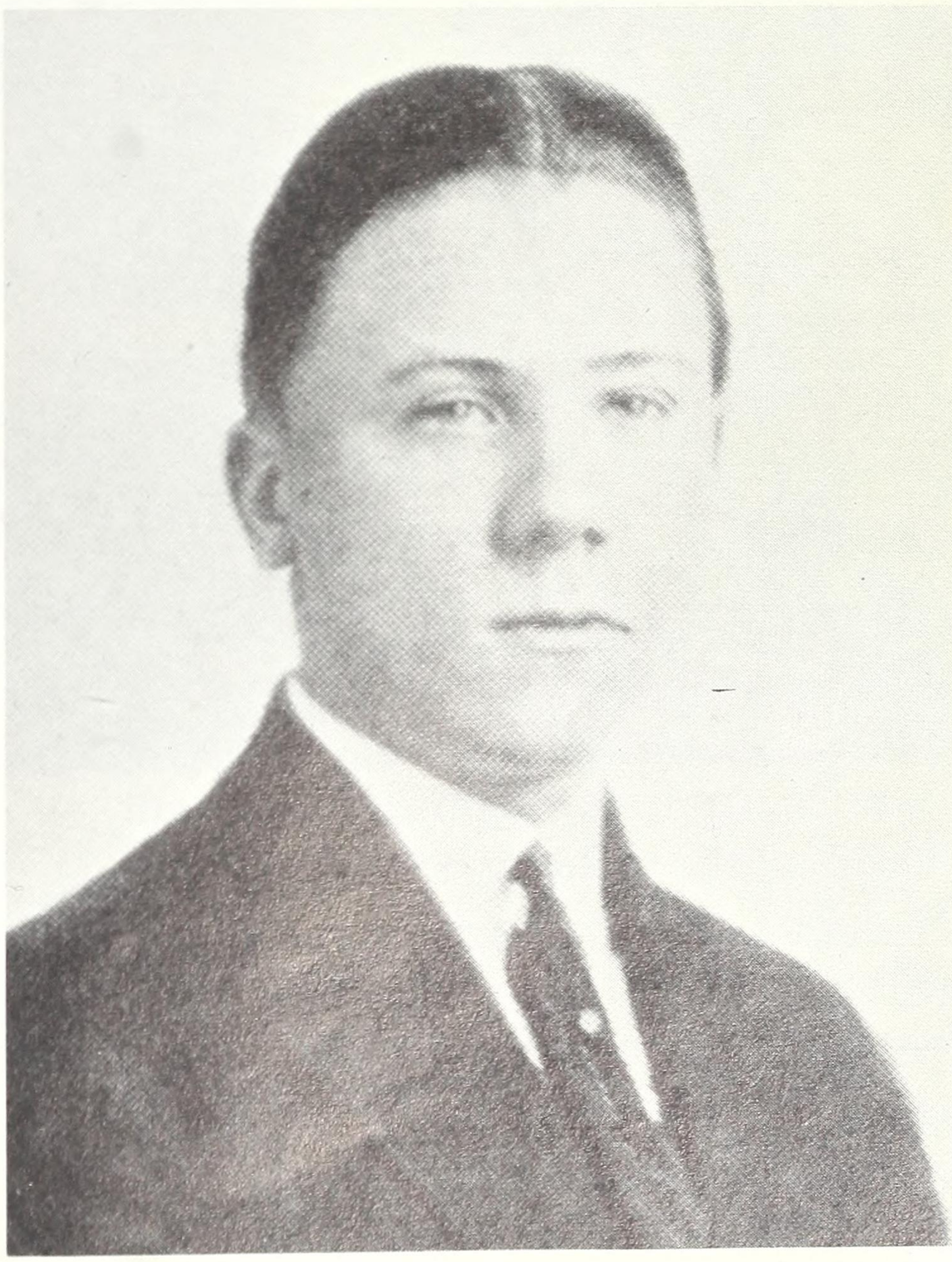
Ray nodded to her.

Young Mr. Rogers at the bandstand announced in a loud voice: "Clear the floor! There's going to be a dance contest! Here's a swell new song by Harrington Gibbs called 'Runnin' Wild' and that is exactly what the song is all about! Everybody ready?"

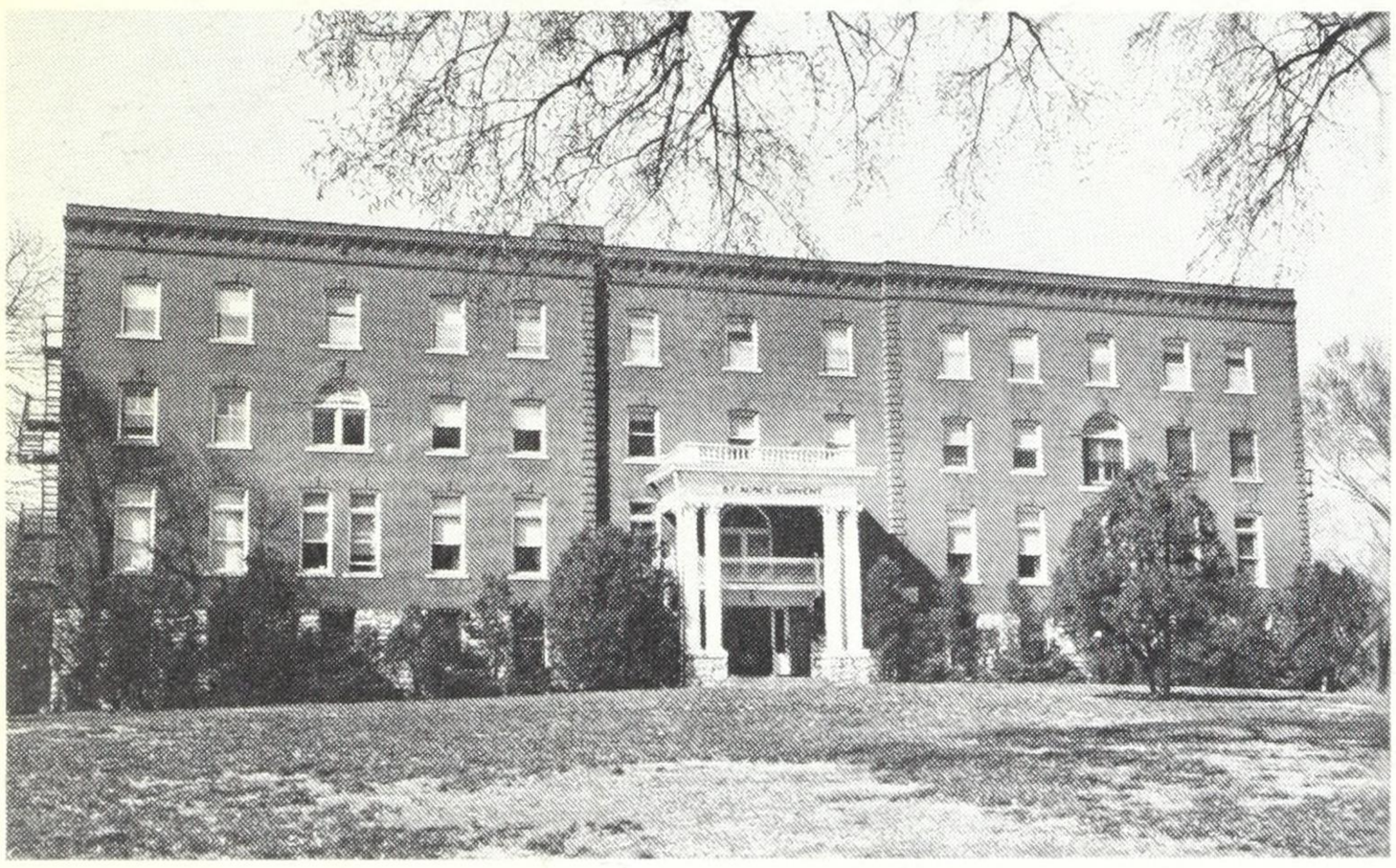
"Yes!!" a hundred people shouted back at him.

Billie's picture from the *Stephensonia,* the Stephens College yearbook, 1922–23. *(Photograph courtesy of the* Stephensophia, *Stephens College)*

Ray Thayer Sterling—his senior class picture from the 1922 *Nor'easter,* the Northeast High School Yearbook. *(Photograph courtesy of Ernie Johnson)*



Billie and her brother Hal, about ages 3 and 5



Above: St. Agnes Academy at 128 North Hardesty; the building no longer stands. *(Photograph courtesy of Rosemary Coughlin and Gussie Clifford)*

Right: The entrance to Main Hall, one of the buildings long gone from the Stephens campus, where Billie lived and worked in the fall semester, 1922. *(Photograph courtesy of the* Stephensophia, *Stephens College)*

☆ Billie dancing the "Black Bottom." ☆

☆ A publicity shot, circa 1944. *(photograph courtesy of Natalie Frost)* ☆

He kicked off a throbbing rhythm with a dip of his trombone.

The judges—officers in the Delta Sigma fraternity—were perched on a balcony that gave them a splendid view of the entire floor. Dressed in tuxedos, they sat on gilded chairs and leaned forward sipping multicolored drinks over a pulsating sea of flopping hair.

Rogers scooped a megaphone off his stool and crooned the lyrics:

Runnin' wild, lost control; runnin' wild, mighty bold
Feelin' gay, reckless too; carefree mind all the time, never blue
Always goin', don't know where; always showin, I don't care
Don't love nobody; it's not worthwhile
All alone, runnin wild!

Several songs later, Billie and Eddie were the grand prize winners.

"I never thought she had talent," said Ernie Johnson, a friend of Ray Sterling's and a K.C. musician who still plays with a Dixieland band, "but she certainly had guts. She had other things too, but I'd better not talk about that; I don't know firsthand. She had quite a reputation."

That was Billie's first dance trophy, the first of many.

Later, she found Ray alone by the foyer fountain (a naked lady pouring water from a jug). They regarded each other in silence—she seated primly, he standing still by the statue—until Eddie found them. He handed her a tall drink.

She sipped from it and giggled. "Where did you get it?"

He just grinned. "Let's dance."

"I'll be there in a minute. I want to rest a while."

He shrugged, then shot a suspicious glance at Ray—who might not have looked familiar without stage makeup—and returned to the dance floor.

"Taste this," Billie suggested, offering her drink to Ray.

"No thanks."

"Eddie spiked it."

"I don't care for alcohol."

"I don't either, really, but it's the thing to do, isn't it?"

He sat on the fountain rim facing her. "Billie, what are you planning to do when the music ends?"

She looked at him askance and sang, *"Runnin' wild, lost control; runnin' wild, mighty bold."* Then she said, "It won't ever end."

He smiled. It was a rare, warm sight, and it made Billie's eyes grow moist.

She said impulsively, "I mean it, Ray, I want to go on dancing—professionally. Do you think I'm crazy?"

He considered it seriously for a moment then said, "People are not all alike; they're meant for different things. Why do you want to dance?"

She struggled for an answer. "It makes me . . . valuable."

"As good as anybody else?"

"Yes."

Eddie returned and grabbed Billie's hand. He said, "Let's go back and dance. We're winners. It's expected!"

"I'll be right there, really." She stood and dismissed him with a peck on his cheek.

When Eddie was out of earshot, Billie asked Ray, "Will you take me home tonight?"

He shook his head. "I have a date."

"That's nothing, silly. So do I."

He looked at her reproachfully.

"Okay. After you take what's-her-name home, pick me up for a drive."

Eddie, though he smelled a betrayal, sullenly deposited Billie at the Wyandotte apartment before the stroke of twelve. She claimed she needed her beauty sleep. He watched in the rear-view mirror of his father's white-and-gold roadster and saw a parked black car turn on its lights. Billie ran out of the door she had just entered and climbed in beside the driver. Eddie drove off disgusted with himself for not being interesting enough, or manly enough, to keep Billie happy.

Ray owned an old open rattletrap (probably not a Model T, though no one remembers what kind) and kept it in running order himself. It coughed away from the curb.

They drove east and north around the business districts, through deserted streets, past Northeast High School, St. Agnes Academy, Budd Park, and the picturesque cliffside drives of North Terrace Park.

"That's my house," Ray said as they passed his address on Norledge.

They parked and looked down on the checkerboard of street lights and sparsely lighted buildings that was Kansas City at night. They listened absently to the clanging and wheezing of freight trains coming from the railyards by the Missouri River far below. She started to cry. "I'm so stupid, Ray! Sometimes I think I've never been to school at all."

"That's a mistake," he said unsympathetically.

"It's not my fault."

"It will be, if you don't start learning something now. You want to be a dancer—fine; just don't be an uneducated one. Be erudite. Be elite."

"I don't know those words."

Ray laughed. "I was teasing, but I like big words."

Joan later told an interviewer: "And the first thing I knew, I had done what I had never done in my life before and, curiously, have never done since: I poured my heart out to another person. I told Ray all my dreams and ambitions for myself. I told him of my vast desire to dance, to be in the theater, to amount to something. I told him of my stifled feelings at school, at home, of my great desire to run away, to try my wings elsewhere. I discovered to my great amazement and with a thrill of pure delight that he didn't laugh at me."

Ray, having never touched her or hinted for a goodnight kiss, delivered Billie home as the sky was paling.

Billie and Ray seldom saw each other that spring and summer and only once had an official date. Ray took her to a ball at Kansas City College—where he danced half the first dance with her and thereafter rarely caught sight of her until late in the evening when she came to ask him for a glass of punch. They sat out a dance or two, as had become their habit.

"He would talk to me about books," Joan said in 1933, "about people, about history and legend and science and the accomplishment of fine aims and ambitions. And I would read all the books he told me to read. I would listen to the music he had advised me to

hear. I would try to practice the virtues and accomplishments of those great and successful and immortal people of all the ages."

Then she would return to the dance floor and whirl off with somebody else.

Billie stopped working at Rockingham Academy at the end of the spring term and took a job selling notions at Kline's Department Store downtown. She was able to buy clothes at a discount and was required to contribute to the rent at her mother's apartment.

Jim Miller remembers seeing Billie numerous times waiting under the awnings of a neighboring store—Emery, Bird, Thayer—for some date or other to pick her up for dinner or a night on the town. The awning space was so popular as a rendezvous that the kids dubbed it "Emery's Porch."

Occasionally a familiar open car sputtered past the Porch. Standing in the back seat of it, a lean hyperactive photographer, Walt Disney, cranked his movie camera toward the waving and posing sweet-young-things under the awnings. A sign on the side of his car said: THESE PICTURES WILL BE SHOWN AT THE ISIS THEATER TOMORROW NIGHT.

The Isis was one of the best theaters in the city and a buyer of a variety of young Disney's photographic products including crude animated advertisements for local merchants. If Billie went to the Isis to see herself on the screen that summer, she might also have seen—after an overture by Carl Stallings at the theater pipe organ—Dorothy Dalton in *The Woman Who Walked Alone,* or Pola Negri in *One Arabian Night,* or Von Stroheim ("A man you will love to hate") in *Foolish Wives.*

Near Kline's was a clothing store that failed that summer. Billie had to have passed it many times. Its owner, Harry S. Truman, suffered little from the loss, for the Pendergast boys had decided to run him for a position on the County Court (which he would win in November).

In one interview, Joan implied that she looked for a good dance school that summer. It didn't say whether she found one, but in her search she might have asked about one founded by a Mrs. McMath—whose star pupil was her precocious daughter, Ginger. (Joan would encounter that little girl, grown up, several years later and would remark, "When I first saw Ginger Rogers dance, I realized how limited my own dancing talent was. I knew my days were numbered!")

Billie lived for nighttime and the weekends. She hated working at Kline's. She felt that fate had dealt her a devastating blow: *she* had to work; the rich girls she competed with on the dance floor did not. It made every hour behind the counter an embarrassment; but she endured it bravely, she thought, and she felt secretly proud.

"With just a little more education," said Ray, "you could get a much better job."

The postwar recession was still having effects; and a college for women in the middle of Missouri advertised a number of working scholarships for dilligent girls. Ray encouraged Billie to inquire.

All she needed, Billie discovered, was train fare and a high-school diploma. "I couldn't possibly pretend I went to high school!" Billie complained to Ray. "I couldn't get away with it; I didn't finish a single course!"

"No—because Mrs. Stuttle worked you too hard. Maybe she knows that and will give you a certificate anyway. Isn't it worth a try?"

Ray was right. Mrs. Stuttle blithely signed her name to a document certifying that Billie had, while working as a domestic and nursemaid at Rockingham, completed the essentials of a Missouri high-school education. Handing Billie the paper, she advised, "Admit to the registrar at Stephens that you are pitifully young and unprepared and ask for their patience. Promise to work like a slave, Billie, and mean it. Or you won't last a month."

Anna Cassin helped her daughter pack. "I can't imagine why you want this," she said, truly bewildered.

In early September 1922, Ray drove Billie to Union Station and put her on the St. Louis local that would drop her off, alone, 125 miles away, in the middle of nowhere, at the college town of Columbia—home of sedate Christian College, prim Stephens College for girls, and the sprawling coeducational University of Missouri.

"This is a terrible mistake!" Billie cried, visibly frightened.

Ray smiled and kissed her cheek. "You can do it," he said. "I'm sure. I'll drive down to see you in a month or two."

Steam billowed from beneath the big Missouri–Pacific passenger train, and with an echoing jolt the wheels began to turn.

In one interview, Joan stressed that her relationship with Ray was uniquely "innocent—I mean *innocent*," and in another that she had "never known devotion like Ray's—before or since." Ernie Johnson,

Ray's friend, said recently, "I always believed Ray was crazy about Billie, really in love with her. But he wasn't stupid. He knew what kind of woman she was and had the good sense not to marry her. They used to drive around town in that old black car of his. Years later, he moved to Florida and went into real estate down there. He's dead now. He never married."

TWELVE

For some reason, biographers have usually assumed that Billie majored in education, with an eye to obtaining a teacher's certificate. A check with the Stephens College registrar, however, shows that she took a secretarial course with classes in English composition, typewriting, preventive medicine (health), shorthand, bookkeeping, psychology, foods (home economics), religious fundamentals (a required course), and rhythm (a dance class in the physical education department).

She lived at Main Hall, one of the buildings at Stephens that no longer stands. She worked as a waitress in the dining hall downstairs and lived upstairs with other work-scholarship and tuition-paying young ladies.

Stephens College enjoyed a nationwide reputation for the high level of motivation and success of its grad-

uates—an inordinate percentage of whom went to eastern schools for postgraduate work and became noted missionaries, administrators, and educators. A "benevolent dictator" is credited for most of that: James Madison Wood, president of the college from 1912 to 1947. The native Missourian, educated at Columbia University in New York, came to Stephens when there were three buildings and 50 students. When Billie arrived, ten years later, there were twelve buildings and 550 students—making it one of the largest women's colleges in America. (By the time of Wood's retirement there were 2,200 students.) The girls called their beloved president "Daddy Wood."

Billie faced a situation quite unlike those at St. Agnes and Rockingham. Her program at Stephens was carefully devised by a counselor to allow her time for both work and study. No one hovered over or threatened her. There was the omnipresent fear that she would fail at what was expected of her.

Bookkeeping was Greek; so was psychology; so was composition. She stewed over textbooks far into the nights and cried herself to sleep.

In her foods class—taught by Miss Jeanette Garrett—her lab partner, Ethel, confided in her quietly during one cake-baking session: "I danced till three last night and drank myself silly!"

Billie let those implications sink in and then asked, "Where?" Dread and hope strummed her nerves.

Ethel rolled her eyes ashamedly and confessed: "The College Inn."

Orville Knapp's orchestra played nightly at the Inn, a rustic dance hall that was the whole lower floor

of a hotel. It looked like an ideal spot for square dancing, but the "hep" orchestra played only the latest from Tin Pan Alley for the new "sheiks" and "shebas" jumping to the tunes. Though, of course, no liquor was served, light glinted like fireflies off hip flasks wielded by swells in bow ties and baggy pants with hair plastered down like Valentino's.

Billie walked in with Ethel that Friday night, and her heart raced with excitement. Music and laughter were loud; lights and whispers were low. In the ladies' room, girls shed and parked the corsets they had felt obliged to wear out of their dorm doors. Humming fans and ventilators blew away the smoke from cigarettes in the hands of boys and girls alike.

The odds, for Billie, were not terrific. Too many females. A gleam in her eye, she decided to see what she could do about it. She rolled her cotton stockings below the knees, hiked her skirt higher under her sash—and smiled.

Women who remember Billie can not explain her attraction. Men can. While overweight by high-fashion standards, she was strikingly voluptuous for a small girl; always athletic, her ample flesh was firm. Her figure was, in Jim Miller's words, "an Anna Held figure" that tantalized a man to distraction. While not yet the chiseled face of a model that it would become, Billie's face—with its wide surprised eyes and perpetually amused mouth—implied that she was the only girl around who had discovered that sex was good clean fun. Her baby fat and perfect complexion made her look about twelve. In a year when it was beginning to be "jake" to be raucous, and titillating to be talkative,

Billie laughed a low measured chuckle and seldom spoke. A joke not attempted is a joke that cannot fail, and a motive unconfessed is a mystery. If a dance partner asked Billie, "Where have you been all my life, doll?" she'd answer him with a silent laugh. If another asked her to accompany him to a fraternity dance, she'd nod and widen her smile. "Come on, hotcha girl, let's let loose!" any number of men might have challenged her; and she'd have spun around him laughing and tossing her limbs with abandon.

On their way back to the dorm Ethel told Billie: "Time to get a haircut."

Billie nodded. She, too, had noticed the attractive freedom of the bobbed hairdos of many of the girls. "And time to hem my skirts up an inch or two," she said.

The security guard at Main Hall, Mr. Lake, had thoughtfully left a back window open. He saw the girls tiptoeing toward it and, whistling, turned his back to them.

In her room, which Billie shared with another working student, she glanced wearily at her psychology book and slipped into bed.

Columbia, like many a college community, was thoroughly bigoted. Blue-collar workers were pathetic, Orientals were tolerated oddities, Jews were beneath contempt, and blacks did not exist. People without money were simply not "top drawer" and most of the sheltered students (apparently more so at the University of Missouri than at Stephens or Christian College) were boisterous, naïve, and snooty. Paradoxically, in that time of moral exploration, an "open mind" incapa-

ble of being shocked was the thing, and the market for "nice girls" was on the wane. "Hot numbers," "flappers," "shebas," and gals who had forgotten how to say no were the ones in demand.

Billie had been popular in the high-school society of Kansas City. At Columbia she became, in short order, a positive sensation.

K.C. historian Fred L. Lee reports that his uncle, a member of Phi Delta Theta fraternity, remembered Billie as a "favorite with the Phi Delts." She was apparently going with a fellow then who was in the fraternity and she often would come over to the house—located at 606 College—and party on the weekends.

"My uncle remembers her 'doing the hot dances of the period' on a table they used to have there in the hallway of the house. Some of the parties, he said, were rather wild ones. Apparently she 'liked to party' and often as not would end up upstairs with her boyfriend and others afterward to 'party on their own.' It seems that this was a fairly regular occurrence at the house. My uncle also recalled her as a very ambitious woman. 'She was the kind of gal who knew what she wanted even at an early age and would do anything to accomplish it.' He thought she had no ethical standards at all."

The Phi Delta Theta house was massive and masculine, cloaked in carved paneling, decorated with heavy dark-oak furniture, with a main hall (party room) girded by a second-story balcony and crowned with a ceiling of heavy beams. There was always a faint smell of sweet pipe smoke. The table Billie danced on was probably the one in the foyer of the main hall; it

was a small dining table of sturdy oak beside a fireplace.

The Phi Delt boyfriend Mr. Lee referred to might have been Eddie Smith—whom Billie met soon after her arrival at Columbia. He was the best male dancer she had ever met, which made him irresistible and threatening. They entered a tag dance at the MU student union, and he won as a single. At first, though, Eddie was only one of many. ("There was no special boyfriend," said Joan, "I dated them all.")

Billie needed party clothes. She applied for and easily got a part-time position posing for Stephens College art classes. So what if she missed shorthand once in a while? The work was tiring and vaguely humiliating (merely because they stared at her; it was not nude modeling); but Billie endured it. It was, however, a reminder that life had dealt her a lousy hand.

Billie was at work in the dining hall one noontime when word reached her that she had a long-distance call at the dormitory desk.

She stood on tiptoe to reach the separate mouthpiece of the wall phone.

"Hello, Billie," said a familiar voice, "It's Ray."

"For heaven's sake!" she remarked. Tears rushed to her eyes as she remembered how he made her feel about herself—proud, as she had not felt since she began struggling through her impossible lectures and texts. He had written her letters, but this was different; it was his voice!

"I have some good news," he said.

"What is it?" she sniffled.

After an expensive moment, he said, "I was afraid

you might not want me to call. I haven't heard from you."

"What's the news?"

Ray found it difficult to talk about himself and nearly impossible to brag. He scrambled for words to tell her that he had won the statewide essay contest sponsored by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. His subject: the deterioration of Western culture as a result of alcohol.

Billie laughed. She had a woozy head and a canvas tongue from the night before.

A scholarship was the prize. Ray would apply it to his pre-law enrollment at the University of Kansas at Lawrence.

"I thought I might drive down to see you . . . if that's okay," he said. "How about this weekend?"

"Yes, do." It would solve a problem: she had told both Eddie and another boy they could take her to the same Halloween dance. Now she could bow out of both because a friend was motoring in from out of town. "I have to go back to work, Ray."

Ethel was waiting for her in the dining room. "Where have you been?" the girl demanded. "I've looked all over."

"What's the matter?" Billie asked.

"Oh, nothing's the *matter*. I've just proposed your name to my sorority, that all."

Billie grabbed Ethel and hugged her.

"The committee meets this afternoon to consider new names. You're so popular, Billie, you're bound to be accepted!"

Billie could hardly contain herself. She had never

before had girl friends, never been accepted as one of them. This was something she had always dreamed about—a whole society of confidants to whisper secrets to, friends to share problems with, to learn with. *This* would make her their equal.

Ethel came to find Billie late in the afternoon, before Billie was to report for the dinner shift downstairs; she was lying on her bed daydreaming.

"Hi, Billie," Ethel said at the door; but she did not come in.

"Haven't they had their meeting?" Billie asked.

Ethel's shoulders slumped a little.

Billie sat up. One of those blinding flashes of anger made her body tingle and then quickly went away. She stepped to her dressing table and began slowly to brush her hair. "No go?" she asked, as if the matter were of little importance.

Ethel came in and sat on the bed. "It was that horrid Josephine McCarthy!" the girl said bitterly. "She said that there was no point she could see in having a sorority if it couldn't stand for something special."

Billie had to hold her lower lip steady.

"Josephine said . . . well, she pointed out that you waited on tables."

Billie said shakily, "I wouldn't want to join a group with her anyway."

"She's a real flat tire," Ethel agreed.

Billie continued to brush her hair, her eyes on some remote thought, until Ethel rose and left.

At dinner that evening, Billie imagined that all the whispered conversations were about her unsuitability, all the glances in her direction were accusations, all the laughter demeaned her.

There was a mystic aura around Josephine McCarthy's table; it made Billie's ears ring when she neared it.

"Oh, Billie," Josephine called sweetly, "you've brought me the most overdone piece of veal in the kitchen. Would you be a dear and exchange it for me?"

Billie pasted on a smile and did as she was told.

"Much better," Josephine said when she had tested the new piece, "but in the meantime my peas have got cold. Would you get me some fresh?"

A girl at Josephine's table looked sorrowfully at Billie and said, "She's being mean and cruel, Billie; don't let her get your goat."

Josephine dumped her dish of peas into the girl's lap and said to Billie, "I do need another serving. Would you please?" Josephine's coterie laughed hysterically.

Billie never returned with the peas. She intended to, even had it on a tray, but in the kitchen she began to cry so uncontrollably that the manager sent another girl in her place and sent Billie to her room.

Lying alone in the dark with burning eyes, Billie resolved to show that girl up if it killed her.

Relating that incident, Joan Crawford told a reporter seven years later, "And really, for years, when I'd be discouraged about some setback and ready to give up, I only had to think of Josephine McCarthy and be inflated with ambition and determination again."

It was the hottest Halloween weekend in twenty-one years. Friday it reached eighty degrees by 1:00 P.M. Wools and furs, floor-dragging mufflers, top hats and top coats—all gave way to baggy pants, short sleeves,

and filmy flimsies. The air was clear, besides, and captains and coeds yelled cheers and greetings from open cars, sidewalk parties, and frat-house windows. The MU Tigers had won their last game, and the euphoria of victory acted as a natural intoxicant. Witches and warlocks and headless horsemen, ghosts and ghouls and corpses were everywhere. The moon was nearly full when it rose harvest-gold just past sundown.

Miss Susan Mendenhall, dean of women at Stephens College, issued a memo to her girls reminding them how unladylike it was to smoke cigarettes and advising how most politely to decline an invitation to indulge. The memo also detailed a few commonsense dos and don'ts and reminded them that curfew was at midnight. It ended with a coy warning against black cats and scarecrows and clouds passing across the moon and advised, "have a happy time."

Ray Sterling checked into his reserved room at the Columbia Hotel and called for Billie at eight. He wore a tuxedo and a black mask. He spotted her with other girls at the entrance to Main Hall and waved from the driver's seat of his rattletrap, which had carried him without incident from Kansas City.

Billie waved back. She danced slowly, sultrily toward him. Boys on the sidewalk whistled. A girl yelled, "Go get him, Billie!" and then shrank in embarrassed delight as chums chuckled around her.

Ray wanted to duck his head under the steering wheel. Billie was a crude but vivacious vision in a gypsy dress made of almost transparent silks of every color; her makeup was exaggerated to the point of caricature. Ropes of beads swayed and dangled around her ample

breasts. Ray stepped down and held his door for her (the passenger side was permanently wired shut).

"Think they'll notice me?" Billie asked by way of greeting.

"Oh, yes," Ray said with a shrug.

Their first stop, Billie informed him, was the Broadway Methodist Church.

There was no guard or hostess at the door, and Billie and Ray breezed in as easily as if they had been wearing what the others there were: farm getups consisting of overalls and checkered aprons. Branches of autumn leaves were clumped around bales of straw and scattered pumpkins.

The Epworth League Orchestra—made up of church members from the music fraternities at the colleges—valiantly struck up a grand march to which a "king and queen of witches" led the guests around the dance floor. Billie and Ray hopped in line and joined the promenade.

"Where's your friend?" Ray asked her.

"She'll show up," Billie said back over her shoulder. She had already spotted her: Josephine McCarthy was the queen of witches; her date was handsome Alfred Egan, an officer of Phi Delta Theta, in overalls, who tagged behind her.

Billie left Ray behind and danced up the circling line to speak to Alfred. Ray saw Alfred's hand stray to Billie's uncorseted waist, saw the boy bend to whisper to her. When the orchestra made a splattering transition from the march to a speedy "April Showers," Alfred whisked Billie away to dance leaving Josephine standing with her arms crossed over her black lace

bodice and her eyes narrowed under the brim of her pointed hat.

Ray nibbled gingerbread and sipped cider until Billie led Alfred to Josephine and made a present of him.

"Let's go," the gypsy rainbow said to Ray, her smile a little wider than usual.

Ray paid the cover charge at the College Inn and watched Billie dance with a dozen other boys. Then he paid covers for only half an hour each at the Century Club and Acacia's blowout at the Daniel Boone Tavern. At eleven, Billie announced that it was time to arrive at the Sigma Phi Epsilon House.

Ray, though he was still a high school senior and younger than most of the men at MU, had grown into a tall athlete not at all unworthy of Billie's attentions. She was happy to have him tagging after her.

Eddie Smith was at Sigma Phi, as Billie assumed he would be. He had snitched alcohol from somewhere and was dancing frantically, dancing circles around a poor dowdy girl. An audience for them had formed and was clapping in time to the jazzy beat, egging Eddie on with shouts and hoots. When he caught sight of Billie, Eddie forgot his partner and pulled Billie into his imaginary spotlight.

Eddie Smith, according to Jim Miller, "looked like John Barrymore and he knew it; he even tried to affect some of the star's mannerisms." He was tall, dark, and sardonic, with a sober expression even when he was drunk. He grabbed Billie and slung her to and fro, lifted her, tossed her into the air. His face was quizzical; hers was unrestrained laughter. He hefted her to

his shoulder and deposited her on the mantel of a huge fireplace.

The music changed. *A pretty girl,* sang a vocalist with the band, *is like a melody. . . .* And Billie slowed her dancing feet and posed charmingly, innocently, sensually. Josephine and Alfred had come in and were watching.

The music segued to a presto "Runnin' Wild," and Eddie helped Billie jump to the floor. Almost like a prearranged special-effect, a cloud of ash and sparks puffed from the wide mouth of the fireplace, and even soot-stained dancers laughed and applauded.

"Let's go to Phi Delt," Eddie whispered to Billie.

"I'm with Ray," she said.

"For how long?"

"Till curfew."

Eddie's eyebrows rose slightly. "That's not long at all," he reminded her. The three-story Sigma Phi Epsilon house was on fire by then, but no one knew it yet. Sparks had flown up the chimney when soot had fallen down, and the wood shingles of the roof were smoldering. By eight the next morning, the roof would be ready to collapse, and $9,000 in damage had been done.

Ray walked Billie to her dormitory door and politely kissed her goodnight. Her still-high energy and evident good humor made Ray fleetingly suspicious, but he refused to indulge in jealousy. He did not watch from his parked car; he drove back at once to his hotel. He did not see Billie climb out the kitchen window a few minutes later, did not see Eddie Smith's "struggle buggy" arrive with its lights off and spirit her away.

Ray did not follow them to Balanced Rock—a "lover's leap" of the first order—and did not watch them in the moonlight laughing, sipping from a flask, making love in the back seat.

Billie worked breakfast and luncheon shifts the next day. Ray watched her flit gayly among dining tables, her eyes generally focused above everyone's heads; and he believed that she was happy.

While she completed her chores, he watched an ROTC parade through the MU campus and along the main drag of Columbia. He was impressed. He was himself a platoon leader, a second lieutenant, in Northeast High School's "B" Company; and these college boys had them beat hands-down in precision, appearance, and sheer numbers. Ray felt proud and patriotic. They offered an image he could aspire to. Next year, Ray believed implicitly, he would embark upon life's great adventures. Yet he felt a lack in himself, and he envied Billie who, he believed, possessed his missing attribute in abundance: the ability to laugh. He imagined that she thrilled to being alive as he and other mere mortals might never do.

Again that night he watched her gather men about her; he marveled but could not analyze it. They crashed party after party, usually with the complicity of a doorman Billie knew. The Phi Kappa Alpha house was decorated with black cats and crepe paper witches, and that girl Billie claimed to know but never talked to was there. The good-looking dancer, Eddie—probably several years and degrees of sophistication ahead of Ray—monopolized Billie at the Phi Delta Theta party, and Billie and Ray included him to make a threesome

to end the evening at Phi Kappa Psi, where the Quadrangle Orchestra serenaded the crowd with sentimental dances during which some students embraced openly on the dance floor. Ray was appalled by the behavior and with a shrug relinquished Billie to Eddie for all the final dances. At the end of the evening, Ray left Billie at her door and hit the highway for Kansas City. He felt exhilarated and empty.

So did Billie, though for quite different reasons. She had definitely given Josephine McCarthy a rough time, had demonstrated who was admired and who wasn't, who had power and who didn't. But Billie had not proved to herself something she unwittingly expected to: that popularity was the secret of life. Josephine, after all, was probably going to pass all her courses with flying colors. Josephine had money and brains. Even though Billie had attracted every male eye in Columbia, she still felt inferior.

Much as she had ignored him, it was Ray she wanted to impress; Ray who would frown if she failed; Ray who believed in the real Billie, the girl hidden underneath that even Billie could not see.

As she set tables for Sunday breakfast, her eyelids heavy, her mouth stifling yawns, Billie resolved to study harder than ever and make it through. Somehow.

But Billie, as Joan confided to an interviewer, "never learned how to learn." There was no *somehow*. "I figured I had to start all over in grade school," Joan said elsewhere. In other accounts, she was quoted as saying:

"For a while, for the first time, I seemed to be fitting in."

"I waited on tables; but tables or no tables, I never missed a fraternity dance at the university."

"The thought that I could dance professionally was becoming stronger and stronger. I didn't see what good college would do me."

"When it came time for midterm exams, I knew I wouldn't be able to answer a single question."

"I ran away."

It was a cold December day, a week before school would close for the holidays. Billie stuffed her single suitcase and lugged it to the station a mile or so away.

On the train platform there was a man who evidently recognized her. He was middle-aged, handsome and distinguished, a trifle portly. His clothes were expertly tailored though he did not look wealthy. The hair at his temples was gray. It was Dr. James Madison Wood, president and guiding light of Stephens College. The work-scholarship program had been a pet project of his, and consequently he had quietly observed the participants.

"Your name is Lucille, I think," he said as he stopped in front of her.

She nodded. She recognized him, but they had not met before.

"Is there some emergency that takes you home for Christmas so early?"

"I don't belong here," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "I'm just not smart enough."

He led her to a bench. She sat docilely. His great

overcoat rustled; his breath came out in puffs of steam, like a train's. "Perhaps you aren't, but does that mean you have to be a quitter?"

They sat in silence until the train arrived. He helped her on and boarded after her. "I'm going to Kansas City, too," he said.

In a 1942 interview, Joan related her story about leaving college; it included incidents not mentioned in other accounts. She said, "He talked to me all the way to Kansas City, trying to persuade me that it never pays to run away from anything. 'You must not go like this, Billie,' he said. 'Come back and, if you feel you must leave, get your discharge properly.'

"At the time, it did not occur to me as unusual that the dean of the college should devote so much time to a headstrong selfish brat. I know now how kind he was.

"At the station in Kansas City, Ray was waiting for me; and that night, in the living room back of the laundry, Daddy Wood, Ray, and my mother talked to me. Doctor Wood felt that if I returned and tried once more, I might make a go of it. Whether that convinced me that I was wrong or just wore me down, I do not recall. But I went back and tried again. It was no use.

"It had been difficult for Daddy Wood to believe that my schooling had been so sketchy. But after keeping an eye on my work for several weeks he admitted that I was under a handicap I could not hope to overcome, and he gave me my discharge 'properly and in good order.' He gave me something else. He restored my self-respect by telling me that I had shown initiative when I entered college, had been courageous in coming back."

Billie returned to the laundry agency to work and to an apartment her mother had just rented—again with Harry Hough. Anna told her: "If you can't make a go of it at school, it's time you learned how to work."

Mr. Hough gave her a tedious schedule and billed her for a portion of the rent.

THIRTEEN

Although they seldom saw each other in the ensuing years, Joan Crawford and James Wood corresponded until his death at eighty-eight in 1963.

Some letters remain at the Stephens College archives. In the file are numerous telegrams and short notes—from Joan, J, Mrs. Fairbanks, Mrs. Tone, Mrs. Terry, and, most often, from Billie. Most of the short ones are apologies for cancelling, yet again, some plan to meet.

One longer letter, written around 1939, probably after a long period of no correspondence, says:

Dear Daddy Wood,

How sweet your letter is, and how little I've changed. The little girl you spoke of with all her dreams gets so unhappy at times for she feels her dreams haven't all come true. If they have, then other dreams are there to be realized.

That's one of the glorious things about life and ambition—you aim for a goal, accomplish it, then on to another and another. It's really wonderful, but oh so discouraging at times.

I'm on retakes of "Ice Follies" at the moment, so vacation is delayed again. However, I'll let you know my plans as soon as I can.

Love, from
Billie

There's an interesting letter in the Stephens archives from a classmate of Billie's—Dorothy Lee Bolton. She asks Dr. Wood for his candid impressions of Billie and for permission to quote him. Her husband wanted to write an article about Joan Crawford's college days. Dr. Wood replied, in part:

> . . . When Joan Crawford was a student here, the work, with the exception of one course, was not at all the thing she was interested in doing. This exception was the course in rhythm. In it she was an "S" student [the Stephens athletic letter of accomplishment]. Her plan on entering was to become a secretary and consequently she was taking a business course. In this she made "I" [inadequate] and in some cases "incomplete."
>
> I doubt if any of us expected her to become the star that she has become because that particular profession for a girl was not in any of our minds. Had we been thinking of someone for the type of work that she did on the screen for a number of years, I doubt if there was anyone in school that would have stood a better chance of selection than Billie.

In 1940, soon after Joan had divorced Franchot Tone and had adopted infant Christina—when critics were enjoying Joan's bitchy performance in *The*

Women, and she was busy filming *Strange Cargo* with her ex-lover Clark Gable—Daddy Wood developed an idea for a screenplay. Joan submitted it to producer Arch Obler, "who thinks it's a brilliant idea!" she wrote to Wood. Apparently nothing materialized from it.

In 1944, Joan's only employment was for a fleeting cameo in *Hollywood Canteen.* She had recently lost her steady employment at MGM (some say she quit, others say she was fired); she had just divorced Phillip Terry; Natalie Frost had recently completed her stay as nurse to the children; and Joan was being considered for the title role in *Mildred Pierce.* In that year, her brief note to Daddy Wood included: ". . . as you once told me, never run away from anything. I've tried to make that my motto in life."

Joan returned to the Stephens College campus for the first time in 1970. She was on her way to Sedalia, Missouri, to preside at the opening of a Pepsi-Cola plant. An article appeared at that time in *Stephens Life,* the college paper, which quotes a former schoolmate of Billie as saying she was "a girl with real pretty eyes, carriage, and teeth, who kept up with fashions and had nice hair. She didn't like it here. She wasn't used to having restrictions placed on her. She liked to date, and she liked the men a lot."

In several interviews and in both her books, Joan Crawford listed three rules for successful living taught her by Daddy Wood:

1. Never stop a job until you finish it.
2. The world is not interested in your problems. When your problems are the deepest, let your laughter be the merriest.

3. If you find you can do a job, let it alone, because you are bigger than the job already, and that means you will shrink up to the size of that job. If the job is impossible, you may never get it accomplished but you'll grow in trying to accomplish it.

Joan professed that these three ideas guided her more than any others. It may be true, but her adherence to them was certainly inconsistent. And for Billie, with her intellectual insecurities, there was a grim, blind determination lurking in those commandments that, for a while, hurried her down a path of self-destruction.

"While making *Possessed,*" Joan once told a magazine, "I wept each morning on my drive to the studio and I wept all the way back home. And I found it impossible to sleep at nights even though I had a horror of staying awake forever thinking! So I'd lie in bed, contemplating the future. I fear it with all my heart and soul even as I fear the dark."

She voiced those fears in 1932. It was ten years after her term at Stephens, when she had become, even by her own reckoning, fabulously wealthy and internationally famous. She had made thirty-two movies, some of them top-grossers, and had "wowed" critics and patrons with her performance in *Grand Hotel.* At the time, she was at work on *Rain.* She went on to say:

"I no longer enjoy parties, as I find the inaction and light pleasantries jarring on my nerves. And when I do attend them, wild thoughts run through my head. On occasion I feel that I must get into my car and speed through the night over some lonely road. Such thoughts fill me with terror, and as a result I act on

them at once. Naturally people are beginning to think I have gone a little cuckoo. . . .

"Sometimes I think that perhaps I'm just going through a period of unrest, and yet sooner or later I always realize that I am not only *not* going through a period of unrest, but that my nature has been the same since the day I was born, that I've always known this fear of the future, this haunting fear that drives me on and on."

But in the winter of 1923, when young Billie returned to Kansas City from Stephens College, she still very much liked the "inaction and light pleasantries" of parties. What's more, she saw that scene as her one opportunity for happiness now that she had failed, once and for all, to educate herself. Like the heroine of *The Red Shoes,* Billie—driven as always by that haunting fear of the future—had to dance till she died.

FOURTEEN

Though she had not been gone long, Billie returned to a Kansas City that was noticeably faster paced.

There were already as many illegal drinking establishments as there had been legal ones. While Boss Pendergast was a law-abiding non-drinker who was now in the concrete business and retired every night at nine, he conveniently ignored what the citizens did while he slept. He allowed "drugstores" to proliferate. They featured "prescriptions" filled by the vat-load for a city suffering from "flu," "croup," "sore throat," "headache" and myriad other epidemics ameliorated by spirits. Dime stores and posh jewelry counters openly peddled hip flasks. Cocaine was found useful other than as a local anesthetic. And a few enterprising young people discovered that marijuana grew wild along the railroad tracks—evidently sprouted from

weeds snagged in the Southwest on train car undercarriages.

Kansas City was a magnet for aspiring actors, singers, dancers, humorists, and musicians. All the big New York and Chicago shows played Kansas City before gliding out along the spider web of rails radiating from Union Station. Shows for the Redpath, Belasco, Orpheum, Keith, Pantages, and other circuits were packaged for the hinterlands in Kansas City. This frenzied entertainment activity produced, as a by-product, an unparalleled night life that turned K.C. into one big Electric Park of dance halls, cabarets (which may have been invented in K.C.), jazz joints, speakeasies, and casinos.

A French journalist searching America for effects of Prohibition wrote: "The wettest towns in America are Reno, Nevada; New Orleans; and Kansas City, Missouri. The wettest is Kansas City, which can be compared only with Juarez, Mexico. I have seen the streets of Paris at their worst, or best, and they are nothing like Kansas City. If you want to have a good time, go to Kansas City."

Billie wanted to have a good time. She needed to desperately. Gaiety was both her ladder and her shed.

Word spread quickly that "Billie's back!" and the phone at City Gate Laundry Agency (Main–912) rang day and night. One evening when a happy horn *uh-ooga'd* outside, Mr. Hough stationed himself between Billie and the door.

"We can't have this," he said humorlessly, as if speaking to a child.

Billie stopped and stared at him, examined him.

Angry thoughts bounced through her brain like ping-pong balls, and she said, "Get out of my way." It was a command.

Startled, Mr. Hough complied. The door and his mouth ajar, he watched Billie hike a furry hood over her head and climb into a freezing open car.

Shortly thereafter, Billie announced that she planned to move out. ("They wanted to take my dancing away from me!" Joan told an interviewer.) But first she had to get and keep a job other than at the laundry. She had hated working at Kline's Department Store before she left to go to Stephens College, but it was a place to start. She applied and was asigned to the package-wrapping desk. ("This was back when paper and tape and string, all of it, cut your fingers like razor blades," Joan told an appalled interviewer.) She held the job only a few weeks.

She then trained to be a telephone operator—a job she felt was demeaning, beneath someone of her high airs and attitudes. So she applied again at department stores. "A friend of mine, a clothes buyer, was her boss at Spaulding's," said Kansas City garment manufacturer Robert Plotsky. "He said she was a pretty wild little girl. She didn't last long there."

She didn't last long anywhere. She was given one more chance at Kline's, in ladies' ready-to-wear ("where," said Joan bitterly, "I spent a month helping women into their size forty-fours"). Then she tried The Jones Store (still a major K.C. store) for a few weeks before trying a men's shop, Rothchild's, again as a package-wrapper.

Emery, Bird, Thayer—still another Kansas City department store—paid her a trifle more than the

other employers—about $15 per week. "She thumbed the classified section of the *Kansas City Star,*" wrote Moffitt in 1932, "looking for any employment other than housework. Finally she found a job as saleswoman in the women's wear section of Emery, Bird, Thayer Company's store. One of her companions bragged to her about the store's traditions.

"'There have been some big people working here,' she confided. 'There used to be a fellow right downstairs in men's furnishings—it was William Powell!'

"'William Powell?' queried Billie.

"'You know,' said the girl, 'the movie villain—and could he sell shirts and union suits!'

"Now they tell you about Joan Crawford at Emery, Bird's. Sometimes they forget to mention 'Bill' Powell."

Billie seemed incapable of saving a dime from her earnings; she remained a resident of the apartment her mother shared with Mr. Hough. Hal got a job as a clerk for the Pitt Company, however, and made his break away from home. He found a small apartment near the Country Club Plaza (which Kansas Citians claim was the world's first suburban shopping center; it opened in 1922). Hal's departure made Billie's life even more difficult; she became Mr. Hough's "only child." He established a strict curfew and announced, "If you are late, you will be locked out."

Eddie Smith came home from Columbia for the Easter holidays and took Billie out. And kept her out. When he returned her after breakfast the next morning, Mr. Hough was at work already, making his rounds for the laundry, and Anna was too weary to argue with Billie. Billie felt she had found a way to beat the system.

It happened again not long afterward. She had been to a high-school fraternity dance at the Edward Hotel. Her date took her home and waited outside the apartment. The door was locked. Billie asked the boy to drive her to Hal's. There, no one answered her knocks. She jumped back into the car and said, "Take me back to the dance."

"Okay," said her date, "but I can't stay. I live at home, too, and Mother's going to kill me as it is."

She returned to the Edward ballroom—and it looked entirely different to her now. "Alice" passed through the looking glass into a strange room of white tables and chairs, sparkling chandeliers, hopping, sweating teenagers, and milling strangers—people who knew where they lived.

She began to recognize a boy here, a boy there; but they were all with their dates; for some reason, she seemed unable to catch their attention. She felt that she had become invisible.

Two girls were singing in close harmony with the orchestra: *I never knew I could love anybody, Honey, like I'm lovin' you. . . .* Billie had noticed them earlier, but now, as she observed as an outsider, their talents impressed her. They were her age, and they were working, singing with a band.

"Dance, Billie?" asked a boy she knew.

"Sure!" she said, flashing a smile.

There was another boy and another dance, and another and another, until the crowd thinned. Billie's right foot ached—and there was a growing knot in her stomach. When the emcee announced the last dance, Billie ran from her partner without a word and ducked into the ladies' room. She heard the last sentimental

song as a muffled melody through the louvers of the door: *The stars shine . . . above you . . . yet linger . . . a while. . . .*

A few women used the facility before starting home. Some came to reclaim their corsets. Sounds and muffled laughs diminished. The orchestra packed away their instruments, making echoing bangs.

Billie slipped to the white tiles of the rest room floor. Perhaps she could just sleep there. But what if janitors came to make her leave? Billie began to cry.

"My goodness. What's the matter?" someone asked.

Billie looked up. The girl who spoke was slender and very pretty; she had short strawberry-blond hair. Billie said "I have no place to go." Billie did not know the girl, but she looked familiar. Billie told her tearfully how she happened to be homeless.

Another girl, taller with dark hair and bolder features, came in; and the first girl whispered Billie's story to her. Billie noted their matching spangled gowns and knew who they were—the singers she had envied.

"Come home with us," the blonde said at last.

The girls had a car, a secondhand Ford that sounded as if it had a wooden cylinder or two. They drove through the almost deserted downtown streets and out toward the northeast part of town Billie knew so well, out toward St. Agnes Academy, Budd Park, Northeast High School, and other landmarks she never expected to see again. On the way, she learned that the girls were Nellie and Lucille Cook, and that they lived with their mother, Daisy.

Daisy met them at the door. She looked like anyone's mother—straggly hair, a sagging house robe over an ample figure, a cherubic benevolent face. "How did

it go, girls?" she asked her daughters. "Wow 'em at the Edward?"

"People applauded!" said Lucille, the taller dark-haired one.

"The important thing," said Nell, the strawberry blonde, "is that the orchestra wants us back for the Ivanhoe next weekend, and they might want us for a tour. But I'm bushed. Let's talk about it in the morning. Mama, this is Billie Cassin. She's stranded."

Camille Demmitt, a relative of the Cooks, said recently, "Nell was notorious for bringing home strays—kittens, puppies, or people. I doubt if Aunt Daisy was the least bit surprised to have an unexpected guest."

The next morning, Sunday, Billie was subconsciously aware of whispers and movement, but by the time she decided to open her eyes, the girls were gone. Daisy explained that Lucille had gone to church and Nellie was across the road playing tennis.

"What would you like for breakfast?"

Billie stifled a yawn. "Toast and coffee?" She sat and let her legs fall from the edge of the couch. "Can I have mustard on the toast?"

"Mustard? Well, I imagine so."

"The spicy taste shocks me awake." Billie looked around in the bright daylight and saw that the apartment was sparcely furnished. But it was spacious. It was also in an affluent area, in a six-unit dwelling, 303 Bellefontaine (the right half of what is now number 301). Parlor windows were open, and a breeze and the chirping of birds wafted into the room.

While they made toast and coffee, Billie told Mrs. Cook about her mother, Hal, the despicable Mr. Hough, and the raw deal life had dealt her. "Why

couldn't I have been born with talent like Nell and Lucille?" Tears of self-pity were forming.

"I'm not at all sure they were born like that," said Daisy gently. "They've worked hard."

At first, Billie suspected that her hosts had lots of money. Then she noticed discrepancies. Along with a few genuine antiques, most of the furniture was merely secondhand. The kitchen stove was a relic, and the cabinets contained only staples—flour, rice, potatoes, preserves.

"Are Nellie and Lucille rich?" Billie asked brazenly.

"Goodness no," said Daisy. "They've had only a few paying engagements. Oh, I see. Billie we live here partly to preserve appearances. To become successful, you must look as if you already are."

"You don't object to their being in show business?"

"It's what they want, and I want to help them."

Billie left her toast untouched and walked out of the kitchen. A minute later, Daisy found her staring out the front window, her shoulders quivering with quiet sobs.

"Stay with us as long as you like," Daisy said.

Billie called Ray a day or two later. Assuming that Anna, Hal, and Mr. Hough were worried sick, Ray let them know their Billie seemed to be in safe hands. He sensed that Billie was troubled and asked her for a date. She pleaded with him to get an invitation somehow to a high-society dance the following weekend at the new Ivanhoe Masonic Temple—where "The Cook Sisters, Sugar and Ginger" were to sing with the orchestra. Ray wangled an invitation through a chain of fraternity buddies and, at Billie's insistence, he re-

served the more expensive table-for-four: Daisy Cook would be joining them.

The Ivanhoe (still standing and recently proposed for the National Register of Historic Places) was then less than a year old and was the pride of Kansas City's elite. Officially, it was the seven-story brick, stone, concrete, steel, and terra-cotta home of the Fellowship of Free Masons—with its exclusive meeting rooms and a famous Gothic "Sanctum Sanctorum" for secret ceremonies and indoctrinations. Its ballroom, 1800-seat theater, and roof garden, however, were open to the public for programs of classical music, evenings of Shakespeare, fancy-dress balls, and palatial banquets.

The event being celebrated that weekend was an annual summer livestock and agricultural market, but the participants were not rural folk; they were the families of high-rolling commodities dealers—the less sedate of the upper crust. Millions of dollars changed ownership in conversations at the glass tables surrounding the dance floor of the roof garden. The only suggestions of farm life were the antique carousel horses (from nearby Leavenworth, Kansas, where the first "jumping horse" merry-go-round was manufactured); these were spaced between Doric columns that supported a vine-draped pergola roof over the dancers. Elegant foods and (soft) drinks were dumb-waitered up from the basement kitchen to Negro waiters in red tuxedos. Capping one of the highest hills of the city, the Ivanhoe provided a panorama of electric light and starlight that was inspiring. The music sparkled, too; strings, two harps, a xylophone, brass, and polite percussion provided sounds that were faddish but civilized.

The dress Billie wore that night was one Daisy had

adapted for her from Nellie's wardrobe. Daisy was an expert seamstress; she made all of her daughters' dresses. She had a knack for approximating the most daring styles while maintaining a decorum she thought right for the girls' dignified act. That combination also worked wonders for Billie; it toned her down from her usual flamboyance and made her more attention-getting than ever.

Boys Billie knew waved and called to her; Ray had scarcely seated her when the first boy took her away to dance.

A circle of floor space formed with Billie alone in its center. She laughed her way through a hodgepodge combining bits of the newest dance crazes with buck-and-wing routines she had learned backstage in Lawton. Her audience clapped in time to the music.

Daisy and Ray Sterling watched from their table—where a man slipped into one of the unused chairs. He greeted Daisy quietly and kept his attention on Billie. Daisy told the man that Billie was a new friend of her daughters, and when there was a break in the music, she introduced Ray to the man—a Mr. Belasco. She said Belasco was a theatrical producer who was taking an interest in the Cook Sisters. (In an interview, Nellie Cook said, "This wasn't the famous David Belasco, but he must have been a relative; he definitely was part of the Belasco theatrical empire." David Belasco was the prevailing Broadway influence of that time; today the Belasco Theater is one of the gems among the ornate old Broadway houses.) The Belasco at Daisy's table was middle-aged, propserous-looking, and clad in plaids like a traveling salesman. He asked Daisy if she'd mind

his speaking to Billie about a job. "Not at all," said Daisy.

The orchestra took a break, and Lucille and Nellie were given center spotlight. A program of that evening's entertainment still exists. Lucille played the piano, and Nellie hefted an enormous accordion as if it were lighter than air (Nellie was frail and only five three). They played and sang "Do it Again," "A Kiss in the Dark," "My Buddy," and three other songs in charming close harmony.

Belasco whispered to Daisy: "Your girls will play the Palace in New York one day." Billie heard him and flushed jealously. She had returned to the table during the act.

After the Cook Sisters had obliged with an encore, "Lovin' Sam, the Sheik of Alabam'," and the girls had bowed again to enthusiastic applause, the lights brightened, and Billie saw a broad-shouldered blond grinning and striding toward their table. A beautiful willowy girl clutched his arm. At first Billie did not recognize her own brother. Then her eyes narrowed and she gave him the meanest look she could muster: she felt instinctively that he was about to ruin everything.

He had been drinking something harder than the drinks the Temple was serving. He greeted his sister effusively and introduced his girl friend, Jessie.

Soon after, Nell and Lucille returned to the table. Nell appraised the young handsome blond and insisted that Billie introduce them.

Hal was exceedingly debonair and refined, as Nellie remembers him today. Within minutes, he had parked his date and waltzed off with Nellie.

Mr. Belasco extended his hand to Billie. "You dance the waltz, don't you?"

Billie's smile faltered as she surveyed his paunch and his plaids. "Sometimes," she said, turning him down cheerfully. There had been no time for anyone to tell her who this stranger was.

Belasco rose and excused himself. He said to Daisy with a shrug: "It's all right; but other men in the business might wish she had better manners."

When Belasco was out of sight, Billie remarked that someone that old had a nerve asking her to dance; and Daisy told her that Belasco was, among other things, a booking agent who was thinking of signing the Cook sisters to a management contract. Daisy gave the information time to sink in and then added, "He'd like you to audition for a show he's packaging. It's a chorus job."

Billie felt faint. "When?"

"Next week. He'd like you to wear the dress you're wearing tonight. I'm sure that will be all right with Nellie."

A book about Joan Crawford published in 1932 contains a comment from a co-worker of Billie's at Emery, Bird, Thayer's: "He told me about the time she set out to get her first theatrical job, electrifying a group of friends by announcing that she had asked an agent to place her as a dancer. At first they laughed. 'I shall never forget how she looked then,' the young man told me. 'Her eyes flashed, and she stamped her foot at us.' "You needn't laugh!" she said. "I *am* going to be a dancer, and I *will* get a job!" We looked at her in

amazement and then realized how serious she was about it.'"

During one exciting week, Billie practiced for her audition, Nellie and Lucille vocalized, and Daisy made dresses. The proposed orchestra tour for "Sugar and Ginger" had become a sure thing, and they needed all-new costumes.

One night Nellie and Billie sneaked away from the flurry of activity and explored some of the notorious night spots—some Daisy had specifically placed on her "off limits" list.

There were police wagons outside the Edward Hotel; its drugstore was being raided again for selling gin in over-the-counter soft drinks. Nobody was bothering patrons of the Baltimore, down the street, where imported wines were being served in coffee cups. There was no danger of harassment at the wide-open Blue Goose Cabaret, which was owned and operated by two former Kansas City cops, Will Gross and Sam Jones. There was a famous basement cabaret that stayed open all night and extended special invitations to burlesque entertainers from the Century Theater. It was one of the few places open to single women in late hours. Billie and Nellie found it oddly dim and businesslike. Patrons were talking about the fifty-five people who had died from poisoned liquor in the city last year.

They met Eddie Smith at a jazz joint on Twelfth Street. Billie had called and asked him to escort them to a notorious speakeasy on Third Street that catered to black sophisticates and white rowdies. It had a national reputation, but no name. There were silver dollars imbedded in the floor, slot machines lining two

walls, a room of roulette tables, an inspired jazz band that played for a frantic undulating dance crowd, and waitresses—about half of them black, half white—wearing nothing but high heels. Smoky air made the large establishment seem vast. This was the first Kansas City night spot Billie had ever been to in which she recognized no one. Eddie had friends there, however, and Billie and Nellie met several men they felt must be active in the rum-running underworld. They were talking about the great numbers of U.S. naval ships used for smuggling Caribbean liquor and wondering whether recent court-martials would dent the trade.

A compact young man asked Billie to dance. He looked very well-to-do. His name was Johnny Lazia, and he was on the city council. (He was also an ex-con who was destined to rule downtown Kansas City and would be machine-gunned to death in 1934.) Billie beamed and laughed; Lazia's dark eyes widened with interest. He danced close and whispered to her.

Eddie leaned against a column in his best John Barrymore pose. "How can I break that up?" he asked Nellie. "Johnny's bad news."

"Can't you just cut in and remind her that she came with you?"

"That wouldn't impress her."

"Let's dance. Maybe that'll make her jealous."

Eddie laughed. "Wrong again. She doesn't care who I dance with. But why should we stand here? Shall we dance, Miss Cook?"

Eddie was evidently mistaken. As Billie watched the two of them dance, she lost interest in Johnny Lazia—who eventually led her back to a table. But Eddie had nothing to do with Billie's jealousy; it was

Nellie. She exuded talent. Though Billie could not sing or play musical instruments, she had assumed that at least she was a better dancer than Lucille or Nellie. Now Billie doubted that to the soles of her feet. Nellie was a lovely dancer—graceful and gay and feminine.

"Let's go home," Billie said dully when the dance was over.

Billie half expected to return to 303 Bellefontaine and find the door bolted against them. Instead a forgiving Daisy was awake and wanted to hear about the "forbidden" evening. Mainly, she wanted assurance that Nellie had expunged her curiosity and did not find the dives to her liking. Nellie understood and made her disgust with the places plain.

Billie thought Nell exaggerated. The places hadn't seemed half bad. A staggering amount of money was being spent, and that guy Johnny was a real dynamo.

That night Daisy heard Billie crying and came in to see what was the matter.

"Why couldn't I be beautiful and talented like Nellie?" Billie whispered once again through her sobs.

"You don't know what you're all about, do you child?" Daisy said soothingly, handing a handkerchief to the frightened little girl curled up on the parlor couch. "Your life is just beginning. For what it's worth, *I* think you'll do well at your audition tomorrow."

FIFTEEN

Billie slipped into the ladies room at Emery, Bird, Thayer's and changed into Nell's iridescent cocktail dress. She hurried out the service door on her lunch hour and ran to the supper room of the Baltimore Hotel where the auditions were being held.

Mr. Belasco met her in the Baltimore lobby and appraised her. "A little too much makeup, maybe. Go on up, and tell Mr. Bridge you're my client. I don't suppose I need to remind you to smile."

Loie Bridge was a veteran vaudevillian, a comic whose name was known in the Midwest but not far beyond. This time he hoped to take his touring extravaganza all the way to Chicago. He named his show "The Loie Bridge Show," although his prima donna, Katherine Emerine, had more box office pull than he. Mr. Bridge and Miss Emerine were both watching in

the Baltimore supper room as a cigar-smoking, hat-wearing agent conducted the audition.

When Billie's turn came, the agent asked her, "Name, honey?"

She had been thinking about it all day. "Lucille LeSueur," she said daintily.

The agent laughed at the theatricality of her real name. "You sure picked a good one," he said.

Billie broke into a grin.

"Show your stuff," the agent cued her. He motioned for the piano player to start his music once again. A jazzy dance came clanging from an out-of-tune old upright.

Billie performed only a few steps before the agent said, "That'll do."

Was I that bad? Billie wondered, her heart sinking.

"Wait outside. I want you back in a few minutes. Next."

There were a dozen girls already waiting in the anteroom. They eyed Billie with curiosity when she entered.

"What did he tell you?" one of them asked Billie.

"To wait here," she answered.

"Us, too," said the girl.

A little later, the agent, chewing on his cold cigar butt, came to the door and told them, "We try out in Springfield. This ain't the big time, girls, but who knows? Loie thinks our bookings will come through and we'll be in Chicago before Thanksgiving."

Billie did not return to work; the afternoon was half gone. She stopped by Mr. Belasco's little office on Twelfth Street and then hopped a streetcar to the

Cooks' place. There she made one phone call—to Ray Sterling. (Joan later wrote: "He believed in me. He knew all about the laundry, the schools, the horrible beatings. He knew the gossip that always encircles a girl who is working her way through life and snatching her fun in the dance halls." At another time she said, "He knew I had to go. He wasn't afraid for me.")

Billie became increasingly sure that she was leaving Kansas City for good. She could save enough money from her tour to make a start in Chicago show business. A new start, new friends, new opportunities.

She quit her department store job. One day, after rehearsal, she joined some of the chorus girls posing in their flapper outfits to promote an automobile dealership. Luck was coming her way. Five dollars for just standing and smiling and showing off a pretty dress. That had to be only the beginning!

Ray offered to drive Billie to Union Station. He picked her up at the Cooks' and tossed the big valise she had borrowed from Daisy into the back of his jalopy.

Billie was too excited to talk.

Daisy and the girls waved from the porch.

"It was probably the next day when we realized what she had done," Nellie Cook reported recently. "Billie had taken not only the dress Nell had lent her but all the new costumes we had been working so hard to finish for our orchestra tour. She robbed us blind!"

The Cooks had two choices: try to track Billie down and confront her or start over sewing new dresses. They did the latter, and completed enough of a wardrobe in time for their departure, a few days later.

Their relative Camille Demmitt said, "They never saw Billie again, except on the screen as Joan Crawford. She knew where they were many times, but never contacted them. Billie told her brother, Hal, that she loved Aunt Daisy but that 'the girls' were mad at her. Hal visited the Cook sisters and their mother many times through the years, stayed with them briefly in New York, and borrowed money occasionally. He told them that his sister did not want to know anybody from her past life."

The Cook sisters finally did play the Palace in New York. They traveled the Orpheum circuit for a good many years and did national radio shows from New York and Chicago. They performed in all forty-eight states, in Canada and Mexico, and on ships at sea. In Hollywood they had small roles in Hal Roach comedies. The team split up when Nellie married Ralph Alexander, a saxophonist with Paul Whiteman's orchestra; but she continued to perform well into her sixties.

They never saw those costumes again. "Actually," Nell Cook amplified, "we forgave her, in a way. Billie had such determination and drive, and she was so frightened of failure. She did what she felt she had to do. It's true we were placed in a terrible spot, but it worked out all right. Better for us than for Billie, as things happened."

Billie "danced in the chorus behind cavorting Loie," said Moffitt in 1932; and Miss Emerine sang the latest from the world's operetta stages. But something failed to gel. Opening-night reviews in Springfield, Missouri, were lethal. Worse: reporters from towns

along the proposed tour were there, and their comments were the final spadefuls at the funeral.

When the closing notice was posted the second night, Miss Emerine—a petite and glamorous woman, aloof and dignified—visited the chorus dressing room. She told the girls: "I know this job meant a lot to some of you. If you're ever in Chicago, look me up; I'll see if I can help you."

Crawford's account of that moment changed through the years; she ended by suggesting that Miss Emerine singled her out and made it a personal invitation to come to Chicago; but in the earlier narratives, the invitation was impersonal.

Billie, unhappy but more determined than ever, arrived back in Kansas City broke, with a suitcase of stolen costumes, with no job, and with no desire to return to the Cooks' or her mother's apartments. She moved in with Eddie Smith—who had left university life, taken a studio, and was endeavoring to set up a school of ballroom dancing.

Billie's goal became an obsession: Chicago. The sooner the better.

Katherine Emerine's invitation echoed in her mind like a repeating phonograph record. "If you're ever in Chicago . . ."

But Billie needed money, and she refused to return to department-store work. She remembered a half-serious proposal Johnny Lazia had whispered to her while they danced. She called him at his office, and he gave her another phone number. She dialed it and talked to a man named Frank DeMayo—an Italian-born entrepreneur who had made a fortune with his

Kansas City gambling houses between 1907 and 1917 and now had fingers in shadier dealings—selling liquor to reservation Indians for one thing (he would go to jail for that in the late twenties). DeMayo put her in touch with a young man recently arrived from Hollywood who was in the movie business. In all probability, he was Lionel West.

West had found a way to make ends meet while capitalizing his new firm, Lionel West Photoplays, Inc. He made titillating vignettes for vending machine distributors.

Billie's work could not have taken more than an afternoon.

"It wasn't a striptease," said Los Angeles actor Greg Rhinelander, "and it wasn't lewd. She was just a brunette gal dancing naked. I saw the film a good many years ago. It was in the collection of the owner of Photomaton, a company that distrubuted those little mechanical peep shows. It was a Charleston-type twenties dance that couldn't have lasted more than a couple of minutes. She looked like she was in her late teens. Joan always claimed she never made a porno movie. Well, I don't think she did. This wasn't porno."

(Rhinelander was also a friend of Billie's brother for many years. Hal changed his name from Cassin back to Hal Hayes LeSueur, moved to Hollywood hoping to follow in his sister's footsteps, named his daughter Joan Crawford LeSueur, worked as an extra and stunt man at MGM and hated it, and was in the Metro makeup department before leaving to become a sporting goods salesman. "Hal was a good dresser, very popular with the ladies," said Rhinelander. "He never amounted to much of anything, but I rather liked

him." Hal died in 1963 at the age of fifty-nine of a ruptured appendix; he was working as a clerk in a Los Angeles motel.)

Billie dressed and asked her first movie director for her money.

"Sorry, sweetheart. I thought you understood. You get your cut when I sell the footage."

"But I need it now!" Billie said tearfully.

"So do I," said West, a six-foot-two, athletic actor who once fought Jack Dempsey in a film. "I'm sure it'll sell eventually."

Lionel West was arrested a few months later on counts of misusing government funds issued to veterans and for taking $15,000 from a Dallas woman with the promise of starring her daughter in a picture he was not filming. He pleaded guilty, was fined $1,000, and was sentenced to two years in Federal prison.

According to onetime Kansas City police officer Jack Halvey, it was Eddie Gettel, one of Billie's many boyfriends, who paid her train fare to Chicago. "Eddie was nuts about her," said Halvey. "He told everyone she was his girl. He was rich. His family lived in a mansion—it's a church now—around Forty-fourth and Warwick."

It was probably her other Eddie, Eddie Smith, who drove her to the station. And it was probably to Eddie Smith that she handed a hastily scribbled note for Ray Sterling. All it said was: "I'm going to Chicago. God bless you."

SIXTEEN

Billie was a girl on the run—alone and confused. By all accounts she left Kansas City with a single suitcase (Daisy Cook's?), her train ticket, and only a few dollars (two to five, depending on the version of the story).

Hard as she had tried, she was never able to convince herself—much less others—that she was as good as the Josephine McCarthys of high society; she felt instead that people laughed at her for making the attempt. She was cynical about her relationships with men (except, she always stressed, for Ray Sterling, with whom her friendship was not sexual), and she had come to despise her mother, brother, and "stepfather" —all of whom disapproved of her. And whatever she thought of them, the Cook sisters represented an embarrassment to her.

Billie had to leave Kansas City; she had to go to promising Chicago immediately; Katherine Emerine

would solve all her problems. No other thoughts were allowed in Billie's mental equation. Armed only with memories of Henry Cassin, who loved her; Ray, who encouraged her; and Daddy Wood, who advised her never to quit and to keep smiling, she made it to Chicago well before Thanksgiving.

A warm wind rushed through the awesome canyons of masonry and glass. Billie stood on a busy street corner wondering how she would find her way to the address she had for Miss Emerine. In most tellings of the story, Joan Crawford claimed that she asked a kindly respectable gentleman where it was, and he invited her to share his cab, which was headed that way. She was frightened because he was a stranger, but she risked it. When they arrived, Billie fled from the cab to avoid paying half the amount on the meter, which the man probably would not have asked for anyway. In an earlier report, however, perhaps the first one, she told it differently. There was no kindly gentleman. She flagged a taxi, gave the driver the address, and then ran to avoid paying.

Panting, hugging her suitcase, Billie returned to the address when the cab was gone. There had to be some mistake. Billie's heart pumped an adrenaline panic to her head. This was a dilapidated neighborhood, no place for a famous performer to live. The apartment house was of sooty red brick, the wood trim needed painting, a sign read BORDERS.

Billie walked timidly up the concrete steps and rang the doorbell. A frowsy woman opened the door.

"I'd like to see Miss Katherine Emerine," Billie said, expecting the woman to say she'd never heard the name.

"She ain't here," was the glum reply.

Billie had no idea what to say or do. She stood staring, not far from tears.

The woman said, "She's on tour somewheres. New York. She didn't leave no address." The door closed again, and several bolts clicked shut.

Billie's head was spinning from fear. She sat on the steps. Kids were yelling and chasing each other down the dreary street; someone raked a stick along an iron window guard. The sounds reminded Billie of the boys playing Indians in Lawton.

There was a drugstore at the end of the block. Billie ambled toward it. In her head, Daddy Wood was saying, "When your problems are the deepest, let your laughter be the merriest." The notion struck her as totally absurd; and it made her laugh.

She was smiling calmly when she asked the druggist for a phone book. She had remembered another name. Miss Emerine had mentioned it in Springfield, and chorus girls had repeated it: Ernie Young. He was a producer or booking agent or something. His office was in The Loop, the easiest location to reach in Chicago. The druggist told her how to get there by streetcar and elevated train.

"Two hours later," Crawford said in 1928, "I stood at the end of a long line of girls before a door marked 'Private.' It was afternoon and I had not eaten. I faced a night alone in a strange city. What is the Power that guides one when they face actual starvation? I didn't know what I was going to do. And then, as though there were some unseen hand laid on my shoulder, pushing me forward, I dashed ahead of those other girls, through that door marked 'Private'!"

Elsewhere, Crawford wrote: "The outer office was filled with pretty girls, all slim, chic, and the most beautiful and attractively dressed girls I'd ever seen. And here I was in a cheap blue suit too tight at the seams, service-weight hose, a hole in my glove. Unless I got into that office before those girls did, I was sunk."

A receptionist outside the door tried to stop Billie. "You can't go in there!" But by then Billie was inside shutting the door behind her. She faced an astounded little middle-aged man who rose to his feet behind a small desk.

"Please don't kick me out!" Billie begged. "I haven't even got two dollars, and I can't go back to Kansas City!" She started to cry.

The man scratched his head. The receptionist peered in, and he signaled to her that everything was all right. She backed out and closed the door again.

"Nobody's kicking you out," said the man, frowning. "That bad, is it?" Though he did not introduce himself, he was Ernie Young—worldly-wise with a fatherly manner. (In an old movie, William Frawley, *I Love Lucy*'s Fred Mertz, would likely impersonate him.) "Siddown. What can you do? Tell me all about it."

Billie did. She poured it out. While she talked, Young selected a recording and cued it on the Victrola. "Dry your eyes, honey. Let's see you dance."

She obliged, and once she began to move, her sadness evaporated and her smile came out. He talked her through a simple routine. He asked if she could do a striptease.

She stopped dancing to think it over.

Young laughed. He knew he had a sexy new client who could make him money. There was nothing she

would refuse to do. She was hungry. Crawford later wrote in her autobiography: "I played that scene again in *Dancing Lady*—pushed my way into Clark Gable's office—and one critic ridiculed it as overdone. Believe me, I didn't begin to show the desperation of the original scene. . . ."

The agent made a short phone call and then grabbed Billie's hand. He led her past the now-even-longer line of hopefuls outside his office, out to the street, to another building in The Loop, up to a rehearsal hall, and introduced her personally to a producer waiting there. After seeing her dance a little, the producer nodded and said she could start that very evening at his club. She would do a single song-and-dance routine, and she would make $25 a week, her highest salary so far.

Walking back to his office, Ernie Young told Billie the position was only temporary. The place won't be half bad; you won't be doing sex.

He gave Billie an advance against her first week's earnings and helped her find an inexpensive hotel room.

"She put together a dance act that was confined to hoofing for a time," wrote syndicated columnist John Miller, "and wound up as bumps and grinds." He said that she "became a citizen of wide-open Chicago . . . presenting the most torrid act a sixteen-year-old has ever provided the cigar-puffing bald heads of the stage doors." (She was about eighteen.)

Billie—calling herself Lucille LeSueur—played several quasi-strip joints in Chicago (probably all booked through Ernie Young), and then traveled with

five other girls to Oklahoma City, where their acts were presented at a businessmen's convention.

Miller continued the story: "She worked around various places while she tried to decide in what direction, other than down, her career was going. She was tired of mixing with customers in dingy bar rooms. She didn't want to take take off her clothes in a room full of howling, hooting rogues. . . .

"She looked at herself and didn't like what she saw. Even her name, Lucille LeSueur, sounded cheap. She decided she was going to stick to show business, but to the performing and dancing side of which she could be proud."

She asked Ernie Young to find her something better.

In an interview in 1933, Joan again compared herself to Janie Barlow, the heroine of *Dancing Lady*. "Janie didn't want to be a stripper in a Second Avenue burlesque show, and I didn't want to dance night after night in vulgar and cheap night clubs, but we both needed the money to keep from starving, and we knew if we kept on dancing one day the big bucks would come. Besides, we had our dreams. Yes, little Janie and I in our stuffy hall bedrooms with the elevated running outside the window, went to sleep every night pretending we were ladies in sequined gowns with huge feather fans and diamond bracelets, dancing, dancing, dancing."

Ernie sent her to Detroit to replace an ailing chorine in a floor show at the swanky Oriole Terrace. The orchestra was on a moveable platform; it backed off the dance floor when the overture was done and

the girls came into the spotlights for their floor show; and it backed farther away when the lights were turned down low and patrons left their dining terraces to dance. The room was opalesque in gray, lavender, and peach with polished steel moldings and milk-glass chandeliers. This was Detroit big-time. Crystal tinkled and hip flasks flashed.

The engagement was very difficult for Billie. She had to learn specific dance routines, real chorus complexities; her agile limbs and ready smile were no longer enough. And she, as a replacement, was expected to master all of it by yesterday. Making matters even more difficult was the fact that the other thirty-one girls were, evidently, an insecure lot, jealous of any newcomer. They seemed to Billie to be practicing voodoo on her, willing her to fail.

Joan recalled those days in a 1928 interview: "I do not know of any situation which can so degrade a girl as to be the hayseed in a chorus. There they are—glittering, jolly chorus girls chumming together with their 'show business' language. There *you* are—lonesome, harassed by that out-of-it-all feeling yet imagining that your whole future depends upon getting acquainted, becoming *one of them.* In Chicago and Oklahoma City I had dressed in a big room with the other girls where I had a chance to imitate their every movement. In Detroit they recognized me as a Dumb Dora and put me in a corner behind a curtain where I could not see what they were doing. They were determined that no greenhorn should steal *their* makeup secrets.

"I sat there staring at the costume someone had tossed me. My heart pounded with shame within me. Shame because I did not know what to do with my first

real opportunity when life offered it to me. I would have returned to the laundry, the school, any one of my various 'fathers' gladly, if I could have had my way about it. . . . There is a zero hour in the life of every person. This was the zero hour for Joan Crawford, neé Lucille LeSueur.

"Suddenly a little dark-eyed kid with dirty neck and ears slipped behind my curtain. 'You don't know much about show business do you? Here, I'll show you.' And she cut rehearsal that afternoon to show me the steps and the makeup so that I could go on that evening."

Billie managed. She had to.

Joan told a reporter for the *Detroit News:* "Even the costumes I wore were a matter of speculation. They originally had been made for a much larger girl—and pinning then in a manner that would withstand several vigorous dance routines a night was no simple matter."

Billie's loneliness helped her to succeed.

Joan told an interviewer: "I had expected to see men standing in line waiting for us after each performance. That was my idea of show business. But each girl in that chorus had her own 'boy friend.' Detroit's beaus-around-town must have known this, for none of them formed in line to offer a new girl a free dinner."

She practiced daily, returned to her hotel room at night when the others were going to late parties, and attained a measure of confidence in her performance. Her endless energy and coy smiles gave way to actual laughter, and her startling personality advanced her from the third to the front row of dancers after eight weeks with the Oriole Terrace show.

One night in late April 1924, a party of wealthy

men and beautiful ladies came in out of a freezing rain to watch the late show. They were given a prime table practically on the dance floor.

Billie noticed them and played to them. The girls did a Dutch number, for which they wore wooden shoes and the steps were like the slow-motion sways of ice-skating; then—after a quick sideline change to slippers and multicolored skirts—came a fast gypsy number. Billie remembered the ballerina in Lawton, and the association made her laugh aloud delightedly; somehow, in a spirit world, they were dancing together. The audience joined idle orchestra members clapping and stomping to the accelerating tempo as the female dervishes whirled.

Billie edged a little toward her table of favorites; she looked back over her shoulder coquettishly, and her flouncing skirt skimmed their table. One of the men stared at her feet then at her eyes; he smiled accusingly: he knew faking when he saw it. Billie shrugged with her eyebrows and laughed. Then a glass tumbled from the table onto the lap of one of the men. Billie's skirt had toppled it. The man handled the matter calmly with a forgiving glance.

"There have been suggestions that I knocked that glass on purpose," Crawford said to an interviewer. "I didn't have that much sense, I didn't even know who he was. He came back afterward looking for 'a little fat girl with blue eyes.'"

A muffled voice came from outside the chorus dressing room. "Girls, are you decent?" A familiar backstage cry.

The girls called out warnings to wait; they wrapped themselves in kimonos and coolie hats then shouted for

the visitor to enter. The stage manager ushered in the man with the wet lap, and introduced him. "Girls, this is Mr. J.J. Shubert."

Thirty-two hopeful faces paled. Was their makeup a mess? Everyone in the room—with the possible exception of Billie— had heard of J.J. Shubert.

The famous Broadway producer appologized for intruding and complimented the entire chorus. He then asked to speak privately with Billie in the hall. Once out there he said, "We're trying out a new show, *Innocent Eyes,* in Detroit this week. How would you like to see the matinee tomorrow?"

Billie had been expecting to be asked to pay a dry cleaning bill. "Sure," she said uncertainly.

"There will be a ticket waiting for you at the box office."

Billie returned to the dressing room and told her one friend about the peculiar invitation.

"He just wants to get into your panties," said the girl. "But do it, sweetie! That man is J.J. Shubert!"

Billie saw her first real Broadway musical the next afternoon. The show was opulent and perfected, brimming with talent that seemed to float on the lush music coming from a large pit orchestra. There was an ode to springtime, "Organdy Days," that featured gloriously costumed singers strolling through a garden setting, which was the most magical thing Billie had ever seen. She realized at once how far down on the scale of things were the touring companies that played the Cassin theaters in Lawton. The enchanting music was by some foreigner named Sigmund Romberg. At the curtain call, the star—an audience-pleasing French soubrette, Mistinguette—was showered with roses.

"That was my first big show," Joan recalled. "I thought I was in heaven. Those girls all separated according to size, in their gorgeous costumes and with their perfect technique and rhythm. Would the time ever come when *I* would dance in such an exhibition?"

Billie was so overwhelmed by the experience that she was able to put out of her mind what she might be expected to do in exchange for the ticket. But in the lobby afterward, waiting for Mr. Shubert, she grew apprehensive. He did not appeal to Billie at all; and she had come to realize that that mattered quite a bit—whether he could advance her career or not.

He approached alone and trapped her in a corner of the lobby. He spoke quietly. "I've decided to add to the dancing chorus before we open on Broadway. Did you enjoy the show? Do you think you could learn those steps?"

Billie was not sure she understood him. She nodded, frowning.

He said, "Unfortunately, our train leaves at two this morning. You would have to be on it."

Billie stammered, "You mean I could go to New York and it wouldn't cost me anything?"

He broke into a friendly grin and nodded.

The full reality of the situation dawned on her. She would have to commit one of the cardinal sins of show business—jump the show, leave without notice. If she told anyone at the Oriole Terrace, they might hold her to her contract until they found a replacement. And the train was to leave at two. Daddy Cassin had blacklisted performers for doing this. Poor Ernie Young; he had been so good to Billie, and this would make him look bad. But Mr. Shubert knew what he

was asking of her. It might be why he waited until now to ask it.

"I'll be there, of course," Billie said soberly. Maybe rules were not for the likes of her and Mr. Shubert. Speaking of her decision at a later date, Joan told an interviewer: "I instinctively knew that to make a success in the show business you must not let sentimentality enter into the business." And this would not be the first time she had stolen an advantage.

It was one o'clock before Billie could get away from the Oriole Terrace. She had not even told her one friend, and certainly not the other stuck-up chorus girls. They'd all find out soon enough that the hayseed they had snubbed was leaving them behind. Billie packed hurriedly. A taxi rushed her to the train station through clouds of blowing sleet. Joan later said, "I don't remember a thing about that journey. I was in a haze of happiness. My brain was a fog of glorious ambitions. Mother, men—not even Ray for the moment—nothing in the world mattered except the fact that I was really to be a part of a Broadway chorus."

She believed she was nearing a summit, a climax; but she would soon discover that Broadway was a first rung, not a last, and that the frantic pace she had lived heretofore was merely a warmup.

SEVENTEEN

Billie was in New York only eight months—a very busy eight months. She lived the erratic, sexual, syncopated pace of the music all around her. It is difficult to imagine her walking much; she must have jived from place to place, wide-eyed and grinning, wagging a finger as if to chide with tongue-in-cheek, "Naughty, naughty!"

Innocent Eyes, a musical revue written, produced, and supervised by Lee and J.J. Shubert, opened at the Winter Garden Theatre in New York on May 20, 1924. The notices were good—especially concerning the American debut of the captivating Mistinguette—and the show played to sold-out houses until it went on the road in August. Billie, as she had in Detroit, advanced from the back to the front row of the chorus; her bright personality made her a standout.

In contrast to the self-centered girls of Detroit, the

New York performers were seasoned, more easygoing, and generous. They took newcomer Billie under their collective wing, patiently helped her learn the routines, and introduced her to the overflow of "stage door Johnnies" who, on Broadway, really did line up down the block to offer a new girl a free dinner. "Those Johnnies treated us to some damn good times," said Crawford; "but that's all they were after, there was no chance for a relationship." Francis Williams, one of the principals in the cast, introduced Billie to another girl in the show, Mitzi DuBois, who became Billie's roommate at a respectable residential hotel.

Not all of Billie's dates were romantic. She and a male member of the chorus, Lewis Offield, palled around after hours and strolled through Central Park planning their futures. (He went on to become a valued player at 20th Century-Fox—Jack Oakie.)

A "smash" revue called *Runnin' Wild* was still packing them in in New York; it had an all-black cast who brought the house down every night with their new dance: the "Charleston." The steps were beginning to catch on and spread, but the combinations were complex, replete with variations and opportunities for improvising. Billie persuaded her beaus to squire her to Harlem speakeasies, where all the new floor shows featured the crazy new dance. She was determined to master it—and fast.

When *Innocent Eyes* went on the road, Billie elected to stay in the city with the Shuberts' next revue, *The Passing Show of 1924*—with a raise in salary to $35 a week. (Adjusted to the buying power of today's dollar, that's about $400. In 1924, one could buy a winter coat with a real fur collar for $20, and a café on Broadway

advertised a dinner of baked chicken, oyster dressing, and "all the trimmings" for fifty cents.) Billie was faring well on her own; through her many men friends she fared even better. A famous actor was rumored to be among her boyfriends, and there was one superstar-friend who had his own Broadway show. Generally, though, she preferred college boys from rich families who seemed to speak her language. The other girls criticized her for wasting her nights with kids when she might be painting the town with wealthy "sugar daddies" able to give her more than a good time.

It has recently been disclosed that during her months with *The Passing Show,* she married James Welton, a saxophonist with the pit orchestra. They kept their marriage a secret, according to the book *Gone But Not Forgotten,* and were divorced in the late twenties in Los Angeles. Perhaps. But there is no such marriage license on file in the five boroughs of New York, and no divorce papers have turned up in Los Angeles. Oddly, the truth of it does not seem terribly important. If she married the musician, it was doubtless on impulse; and it does not seem to have slowed her down.

New York has always been exciting; it was particularly so for performers in the season of 1924. There were literally hundreds of plays and musicals running on Broadway. Success seemed easy. Fannie Brice starred first in the *Ziegfeld Follies,* then in Irving Berlin's *Music Box Revue.* Ethel Barrymore was in *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* at the Cort. Henry King's film *Romola* starred Lillian and Dorothy Gish at the George M. Cohan Theater. Marilyn Miller was still playing *Peter Pan* live, even though her movie of it was in town.

Will Rogers was at the *Ziegfeld Follies* (which one could see for $1). *The Student Prince* opened at the Jolson. Eddie Cantor was in *Kid Boots.* George M. Cohan starred in his own *Song and Dance Man.* Fred and Adele Astaire were in Gershwin's *Lady Be Good.* Billie Burke was featured in *Annie Dear* at the Times Square on Forty-second Street. It was Walter Hampden's turn to play *Cyrano de Bergerac,* and Otis Skinner's to play *Sancho Panza.* It was a very good year.

While "talkies" had not yet emerged to challenge the divine right of stagecraft, radio had. And it was indirectly due to radio—and to two men in radio who got very rich very fast: Nils T. Granlund and Harry Richman—that Billie received her next big break.

Nils Granlund's name was a legend in New York by 1924. Starting in 1920—when radio was "non-commercial," everybody's favorite hobby, and listeners fought over the family crystal set—he dominated the air waves with his talk and variety shows. He was the first Ed Sullivan. Recordings were first broadcast on his show. Musicians threatened to strike to prevent "free" radio plays they felt would diminish sales. The opposite proved true. Granlund—known to his radio audience as "NTG"—was the first disc jockey. He pioneered the use of advertising to pay for air time. A onetime theatrical stage manager, he parlayed his hobby into a multimillion-dollar enterprise. At the same time, he was accomplished and famous as a packager of cabaret and floor shows. Barbara Stanwyck, Claire Luce, and Ruby Keeler eventually came out of his shows. At one time, a few years after 1924, he had thirteen major shows running in town, and he owned some of the clubs he booked them into.

Harry Richman was considered "the greatest singer of songs in America." He was one of the first crooners famous for making women swoon. He was also notoriously promiscuous. He once said, "Getting girls was never a problem. The problem was beating them off. There were times in George White's *Scandals* and the [Ziegfeld] *Follies* when I made a list of the girls I wanted and managed to tick off every one, one by one."

Richman was a big man even before Granlund asked him to share his radio spotlight. Together they were a phenomenon. Every major songwriter—Berlin, Romberg, Gershwin, Kern, Youmans, Cohan—wanted their tunes introduced by Richman on an NTG show. Granlund pocketed all the advertising dollars; Richman was not paid a salary but settled for $5 per song each time he sang it. They broadcast seven hours a day, six days a week, and Richman could sing twenty songs in an hour.

Early in 1924, the two men opened Club Richman at 157 West Fifty-sixth Street. Almost overnight it became *the* night spot—one of the most lavish and expensive and popular of New York's 100,000 speakeasies. A Prohibition invention called the "cover charge" is what really kept the money rolling in. Club Richman catered to the upper crust who virtually demanded that it keep raising its cover to keep out the riffraff. When it reached $6 per person (that would be around $75 today) the lines outside were at their longest. "I was raking money in," said Richman, "and I couldn't spend it fast enough." Al Capone became a friend of Harry's. The great love of his life was Clara Bow. He seemed to attract talented Kansas City gals; two others were Jean

Harlow and Hal Cassin's favorite fan dancer, Sally Rand. Billie came to Harry by way of NTG.

Ed Sullivan wrote in a column that Billie met NTG backstage at *The Passing Show*. Never one to miss an opportunity, Billie followed up that first meeting with a visit to Granlund's office. NTG said of that occasion:

"She was a gorgeous girl, with huge blue eyes, perfect features, and ripe voluptuous lips. I was employing more than a hundred girls at the time, in night clubs, vaudeville, and radio, and this girl was easily the prettiest of them all. But she wasn't on our payroll. I had never seen her before. And it's a wonder that I thought she was beautiful, for she was crying such a cascade of tears I could hardly see her face. Between sobs she managed to tell me her story.

"Her name was Lucille LeSueur, she said, and she was working in the chorus at the Winter Garden. 'I only get $30 a week,' she said, sobbing, 'and my mother is sick in Kansas City. I've got to have extra work so I can make more money. The girls tell me you have lots of jobs in night spots. Can you give me work after my show at the Winter Garden?'"

The only club presently in rehearsal was Club Richman. NTG called Harry and told him to put the girl in the act. Harry protested that he had all the girls he needed.

"Look," NTG pleaded, "just let her sit on a piano or dance a Charleston or something. Give her fifty dollars a week and don't give me any argument."

Billie was learning the sneakier ins and outs of show business. She knew how to use her tears. She knew that the mediocre notices garnered by *The Passing Show* might doom her to unemployment, and she

was planning ahead. ("The sixth *Scandals* wasn't much good, the twelfth edition of *The Passing Show* wasn't as good as the *Scandals,*" said a critic that season.)

Billie was soon working such long hours that she had little time for men; but she was making enough money to dress as snazzily as she chose. (Crawford told an interviewer that she didn't save a penny of it.) According to comments and reports from that period, Billie was alternately an arrogant swellhead and a pitiful pushover.

Harry Richman had a famous door that connected his inner office to the dressing alcove of the ladies' powder room at Club Richman. Girls would leave their dressing rooms—or their escorts—and use that door for private visits to the big man's Playboyesque inner sanctum. Late in life, Richman was outspoken and candid, but he never indicated whether or not Billie used that door. He did say that after a short time he gave her a featured spot and additional money for teaching the Charleston to his other girls.

Just before her first major show was to open at the Club, Billie showed up at NTG's office. In tears again. "I've got to have an evening gown!" she blubbered. Richman required each of his showgirls to mingle with customers after the shows, and they had to look like a million bucks. Billie said she didn't have a cent to spend on a new dress.

Granlund ("more upset than even he admits," said a columnist who told this story) sat Billie down and told her frankly: "Look here, I'm not going to chump for you. You're making plenty of money to buy your own." But because she had "sent too much to her sick

mother," her funds were low. Soft-hearted NTG hesitated but finally handed her a check.

He telephoned a friend who owned a dress shop on Forty-second Street and told him Billie was on her way with a blank check. "If she makes it out for more than twenty dollars, it'll bounce," said NTG unconvincingly.

Later, Billie returned to Granlund's radio office with a large long box. Billie lifted from the box a scrumptious gown that obviously cost much more than the limit Granlund had set. Ignoring the discrepancy, Billie announced that she was going to model the dress for her benefactor then and there.

She was pulling the new gown over her head when Granlund's office door sprang open. "Was I embarrassed!" NTG said later.

The man who entered was Marcus Loew, theater magnate and impresario, who had just bought MGM. Granlund fumbled out an explanation of sorts, and Mr. Loew laughed. Loew was then negotiating with NTG to star on the new radio station he was buying, WHN in New York.

NTG introduced Billie to Mr. Loew. Billie smiled at the situation and at Mr. Loew. Granlund remarked that Billie ought to be just what MGM was after for the flickers. Loew took him seriously and said with some interest: "Have Bowes make a screen test of her." (The Bowes in question was Edward "Major" Bowes, who went on to national fame for his "Amateur Hour" radio shows. Bowes then worked for Loew.)

To their astonishment, Billie told the two influen-

tial men, "Thank you, but I just want to be a dancer, and you can't dance in the movies, can you? No music."

"But the money and the fame!" said Granlund.

"Surely you don't want to be just a chorus dancer all your life," said Loew. "What will you do when you're too old—marry somebody?"

Billie shook her head. "I don't know about movies. I do know about dancing. I'm doing all right." Indeed she was. At nineteen, she was making between $80 and $100 a week (over a thousand of today's dollars), was in a Broadway revue, and had a solo spot at the most famous club in Manhattan.

Nils Granlund and Harry Richman ganged up on Billie. "You must try the screen test," they implored. "It might not amount to anything, but you never can tell."

According to Joan Crawford and most of her biographers, an MGM talent scout, Harry Rapf, spotted Billie in the chorus of *The Passing Show* and asked her to make the test; reluctantly she did, and passed it with flying colors. In the thirties, she admitted to horror-moviemaker Val Lewton: "As a matter of fact, Harry Rapf never saw me dance." Occasionally, she indicated that Granlund had something to do with the screen test. The story given here is the way Granlund, Richman, and reporters *they* talked to remembered it.

The *Club Richman Revue* had a splashy and successful opening night. NTG wrote that Billie "danced the Charleston as I had suggested, and generally decorated the place with her loveliness." He said that after the performance, when Billie emerged in her beautiful new gown, "the big butter-and-egg men, plus the handsomest playboys, gathered around her and sought

her attention. She searched the room and saw me sitting at a table in a far corner. 'Granny,' she said and waved, and the crowd around her opened and let her through. 'Take me home, Granny,' she said when she came over to me. I saw a great deal of her after that."

Encouraged by Richman, Billie reported to Mr. Bowes, who had been instructed by Mr. Granlund and Mr. Loew to set up a screen test for her.

Major Bowes directed her in a soundless vignette. The film was processed in New York and sent to MGM in Culver City, California, where a committee evaluated it. The reply came a few weeks later: "She doesn't have what we're looking for."

At Granlund's insistence, several more tests were made. His powerful friend, Marcus Loew, permitted it. "But invariably the word came back—'no good,'" said Granlund.

Meanwhile *The Passing Show of 1924* passed after ninety-three performances. Though she was cushioned by her work at Club Richman, Billie was restless. She was afraid. She felt that Fate had dealt her yet another ace of spades. Billie cried a lot and made life uncomfortable for people who cared about her.

"Finally, in some desperation," said Granlund, "I telephoned Harry Rapf, a friend who had become a producer for Metro in California. 'Sign this girl,' I said, and I gave him the same pitch I'd given Richman. He promised to do what he could."

Billie was on the verge of a breakdown. She was happy only when she was out on the Club Richman floor laughing, flailing her limbs, and swinging her beads. At night, she slept with letters from Ray Sterling under her pillow. (Crawford later said, "I tied them up

in little packets with pink ribbons.") In the daytime, she had too much time to think. All her insecurities haunted her. Failures at school, at home, with men, even with dancing floated like corks atop the sea of her consciousness.

"Go home, Billie," Harry Richman advised. "We can do without you for a week or so. Go home. Spend the Christmas holidays with your folks. Relax a little." He was worried about her.

The suggestion caused Billie scrambled emotions. She had no desire to see "her folks," and had sworn to herself as a matter of honor that she would never return to Kansas City. But Ray was there—Ray who would be proud when he heard how much she had accomplished. Perhaps her mother and Hal would be glad for her, too. Maybe her mother would hold her the way she had that once, in Lawton, when her torn foot hurt so much. "I'll go," she said at last.

Joan told the *St. Louis Star* in 1929: "The nervous strain of my work in the chorus and in the night club whipped me, and I had a breakdown. I bought a ticket to Kansas City."

EIGHTEEN

Billie felt tired. Her enthusiasm flared briefly at the thought of returning home victorious; but it waned quickly as she convinced herself that she had done nothing to brag about. Josephine McCarthy was still champion.

Ray picked her up at the station on Monday, December 22. She had very little to say—even to him. He sensed she was troubled and took her for a roundabout drive in the arctic air. They drove out by his house on Norledge and in the process passed St. Agnes Academy and Budd Park. Billie stared at them as if they had no bearing on her past. Ray did most of the talking. He had become active in local politics; he promoted new and better methods of liquor control, and he was pleased to report that Kansas City would soon be much dryer and much more Christian. It occurred to Billie fleetingly that Ray would want to drive Harry

and NTG out of business. But she felt nothing at the thought; a fuse had blown in her emotional circuit. (Some references to Billie's return to Kansas City say that Ray was out of town "spending the holidays with his parents." But Ray's parents did not live out of town.)

Billie had been gone only eight months but circumstances had changed in Kansas City. Hal had married his girl friend Jessie, a model at Kline's, and they had moved to an apartment at 1030 Tracy, downtown. Mr. Hough and Anna were still together, but their relationship was dying fast. Anna spent all the time she could at Hal and Jessie's. They were planning a big Christmas dinner there.

Billie fit in like a pebble in a sock. To the extent she felt noticed, she felt as if she were in the way. She had a little money saved for when she returned to New York. She spent it all on Christmas presents. That got their attention but didn't keep it. At dinner at Hal's, Christmas afternoon, she told them stories about New York life. She was overly animated, laughing, her eyes bright with tears. But they missed the plea for help beneath her gaiety.

Later, back at Mr. Hough's apartment, Billie stared at a wall waiting for Ray to drop by; he had promised he would if his family would excuse him. There was a knock at the door. "Telegram!" said a muffled voice outside.

The accepted story is that the telegram came from MGM, and that it instructed Billie to get traveling money from the Kansas City distribution office of MGM. However, in New York the day before, as Nils Granlund related, "We were having a Christmas party

in Nick Schenck's office when the Metro treasurer came in. 'Granny,' he said, 'where can we reach Lucille LeSueur? Hollywood wants to sign her to a contract.' He had been trying to locate her all morning, he said. I told him she had gone to Kansas City to spend the holidays with her mother. The treasurer gave me a check for four hundred dollars and instructions to get it to her for expenses, along with orders to head for the Coast. I wired the money and the message."

The telegram in her hand said that Lucille LeSueur was to receive the splendid salary of $75 per week, and that she was to be in California within a week. She stared at it.

"The telegram rather stunned me," said Joan, "but I was thrilled, too." Maybe all those things her roommate Mitzi said about California were true. Maybe this would be the start of a better life. It was certainly an opportunity to begin again with all new people, people who knew nothing about her fumblings and failings.

She wired Granlund back: "This is the happiest Christmas of my life."

But it was not a happy Christmas. Eddie Gettel's parents had said—like the parents on D Avenue in Lawton—that they'd rather he didn't play with her anymore. Eddie Smith was evidently out of town. Billie wanted to hit Kansas City hot spots, but not with Ray, who would probably have refused to enter them anyway.

She took what was left of the $400 after buying her train ticket and splurged on a few summery things for California. There was plenty of money waiting out there, after all. The salary offered her was more than

Anna's and Mr. Hough's incomes combined. They were impressed. Hal perked up, too.

Billie complained to Ray that she was a dancer, not an actress, and that the movie job seemed off the track for her.

"It's a short cut," he told her. "You can save your money, study dancing, and fulfill your real ambition." He forgot for the moment that saving and studying were not chief among Billie's virtues.

The Missouri Pacific train westbound from the East made a midway stop in Kansas City in the early hours of the morning. Billie made her own way to the terminal by taxi. (The next time she would see Union Station in Kansas City would be late in 1929 when she and her new husband, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., were interviewed while waiting to change trains. She managed to put reporters on the defensive by mentioning the poor reception of her early films in Kansas City, and they effusively assured her that Kansas City now loved her. She said to Doug, "As soon as we get back from Paris, I really must come back to Kansas City for a visit." She did—about forty years, eighty movies, and three husbands later.) Billie tipped the porter carrying her bags and entered a madhouse at the station. It was New Years' Eve. The balloons had fallen, confetti and streamers covered the marble floor and clung to ankles and feet, a few drunks were being led away by police. Billie had an hour to wait. She sat on a suitcase and watched the janitors come out to wipe away the signs of other people's happiness.

The station was stark again, and quiet, when she stepped abaord the Sunset Limited. It was below zero outside. The moonlit snow-covered streets of the city—

deserted in the hours before dawn—were a blur of shadows out the window of the warm train car. "I'll never forget that trip," Joan wrote. "I had spent all my advance money and had to take a coach. I sat up all the way to California." And elsewhere: "My time in the train was divided between feeling homesick for Mitzi and the theater and planning how soon I could go back to New York."

There was no brass band waiting for Billie at the Culver City stop, as her friend Mitzi had led her to expect. Instead, a secretary from the studio picked her up and delivered her to the Washington Hotel. Next day she reported for work.

She continued to report, but all she did was watch other people's activity on the sound stages while awaiting her chance to go before the cameras. The waiting might have depressed her if she had not discovered a West Coast night life to rival New York's. "I danced all night," Joan said. "Tuesdays at the Montmartre, Fridays at the Coconut Grove, the Saturday tea-dance kid."

It was several months before MGM found a use for Lucille LeSueur—as a stand-in for Norma Shearer. That occupied her for a couple of days.

Margaret Harrison wrote in 1936: "Joan set about to bring herself to public attention less by her work in pictures than by a continuous night life that would have put most girls under the sod. In less than two years, she had won eighty-four cups in nightclub contests for dancing the Charleston, or imitating Bee Jackson, the shimmy expert. She was, then, undistinguished in appearance from any other good-looking girl, except by her curiously arresting eyes. She hid the

fine structure of her face by pulling her brown hair onto her cheeks and over her forehead, and by a careless mask of makeup. Later she dyed her hair flaming red and rolled her stockings not quite far enough above her knee-length skirts."

A writer for the *Los Angeles Times* said in 1927, "People think her happy-go-lucky, frank, wholeheartedly independent. Yet she is so sensitive that a blunt opinion often sends her into a dark moody spell which she has to fight for hours."

They called her "the hotcha kid" and "the hey-hey girl."

She was everywhere—except in the movies. She developed a platonic relationship with Paul Bern, "who took Ray Sterling's place as the keeper of my dreams," she said; and she steadily dated Mike Cudahy, alcoholic heir to a Chicago meat-packing fortune. (Mike was actually from Kansas City, but the two would not likely have met there. In Los Angeles, he was seventeen when she was twenty-one.)

Billie was "Miss MGM" in a featurette made to promote new movies to exhibitors, and she was finally given a noticeable role in *Pretty Ladies* with Zasu Pitts and Lilyan Tashman. She and Myrna Loy were chorus girls. Those were her only screen credits as Lucille LeSueur.

She posed for ads for sporting goods, designer fashions, Lux soap, and a French garter watch. She courted the columnists and continued to dance the nights away.

"Lucille LeSueur, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer player and champion Charleston dancer of the studio, will be the star Charleston dancer at Loew's State tonight," an-

nounced an item in the *Los Angeles Examiner* in August 1925. "Miss LeSueur recently assisted Fanchon, of Fanchon and Marco, in teaching Pauline Sparke the Charleston during Miss Sparke's appearance in the chorus of Charleston steppers at Loew's State."

Louella Parsons viewed Billie's first screen appearances and said she had "one of the most promising futures of any young screen actress." And thereafter MGM kept Billie a little busier.

She was given a major role in *Old Clothes* with Jackie Coogan—but the studio had decided they didn't like the name Lucille LeSueur. Too stagey. So they changed it to Joan Arden. But there was already a Joan Arden—a bit player at MGM—so another name had to be found. Meanwhile filming began on *Old Clothes.*

A columnist called Lucille "the gayest, giddiest thing to hit town." A reporter looking back from 1932 said, "It was her jazz age. I really mean jazz. That last year or two she left a sizzling trail, going places and doing things no one else had dared."

At first Billie was reluctant to simplify her night life, but as her work at the studio became more interesting and rewarding, as her fame began to spread, she developed a grim concentration she carried onto every movie set. They say she was never late for work. They say she befriended even the lowest workers on the crews and earnestly asked their advice.

Cecil Beaton, before he became one of Hollywood's most treasured designers, was a studio still photographer. He recalled a session for a publicity shot of Lucille LeSueur. "She wallowed in makeup—liked it so much she made up for her pictures twice a day. I had

no patience with her, and after four pictures we called it a day."

Writer Larry Carr said, "She spent the next five years experimenting with her looks and so changing them that the result was a variety of faces. Sometimes she was hardly recognizable from one film to the next."

MGM's publicity department hit on an unusual stunt. They went to a major fan magazine and proposed a name-the-starlet contest. Pictures of Billie were published (probably those taken by Mr. Beaton) and an appropriate name was asked for. Entries came from all over the world. Mrs. Louis M. Arisdale of Rochester, New York, suggested "Joan Crawford" and won $500.

A very tired Lucille LeSueur reported as instructed to Harry Rapf's office one afternoon. Photographers were there. Rapf presented her the new name—neatly lettered on cardboard by the studio art department—and she left grumbling that it sounded like "crawfish."

Her rise to a position as "the favorite new star of MGM" took about a year.

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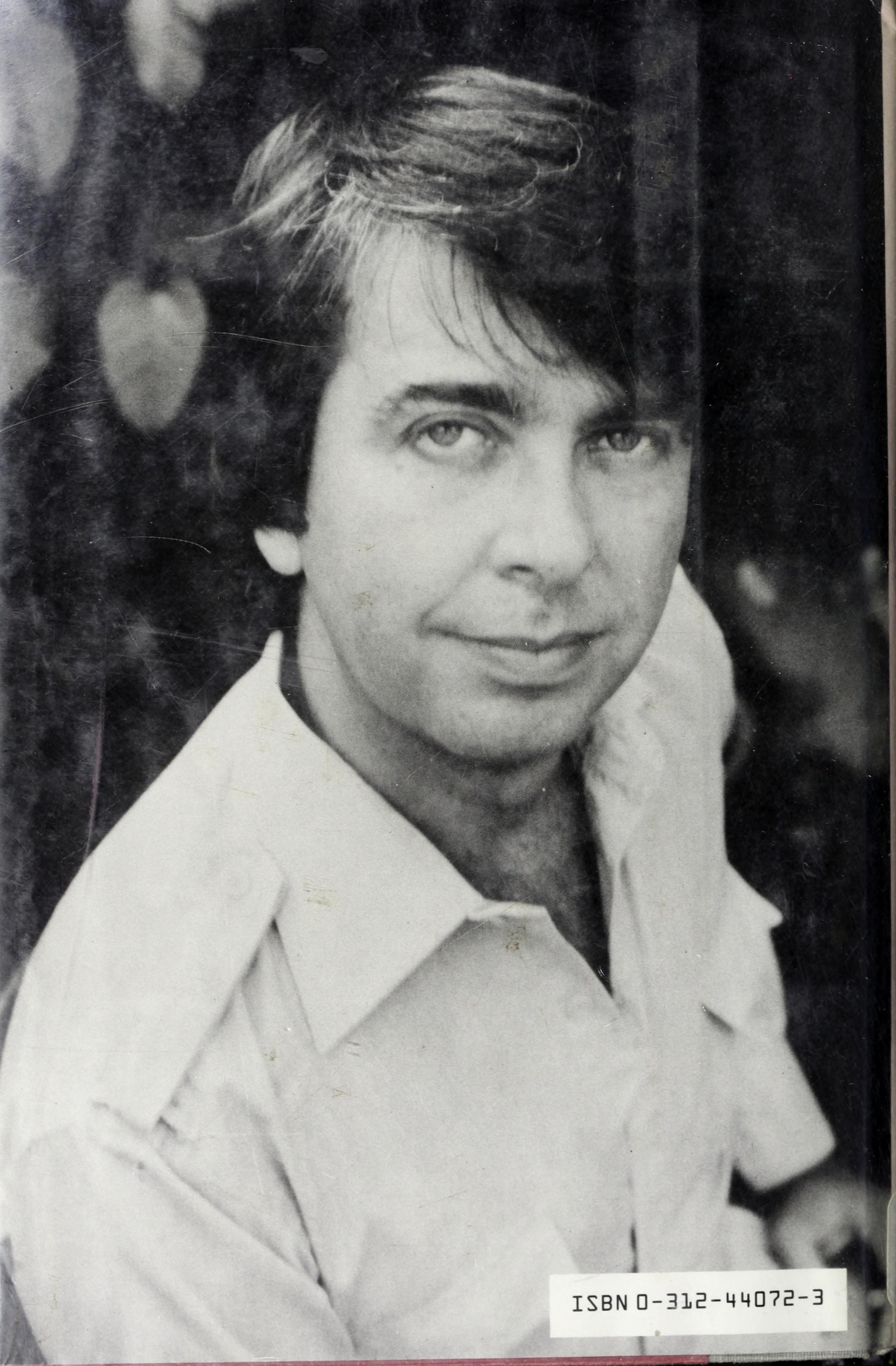

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